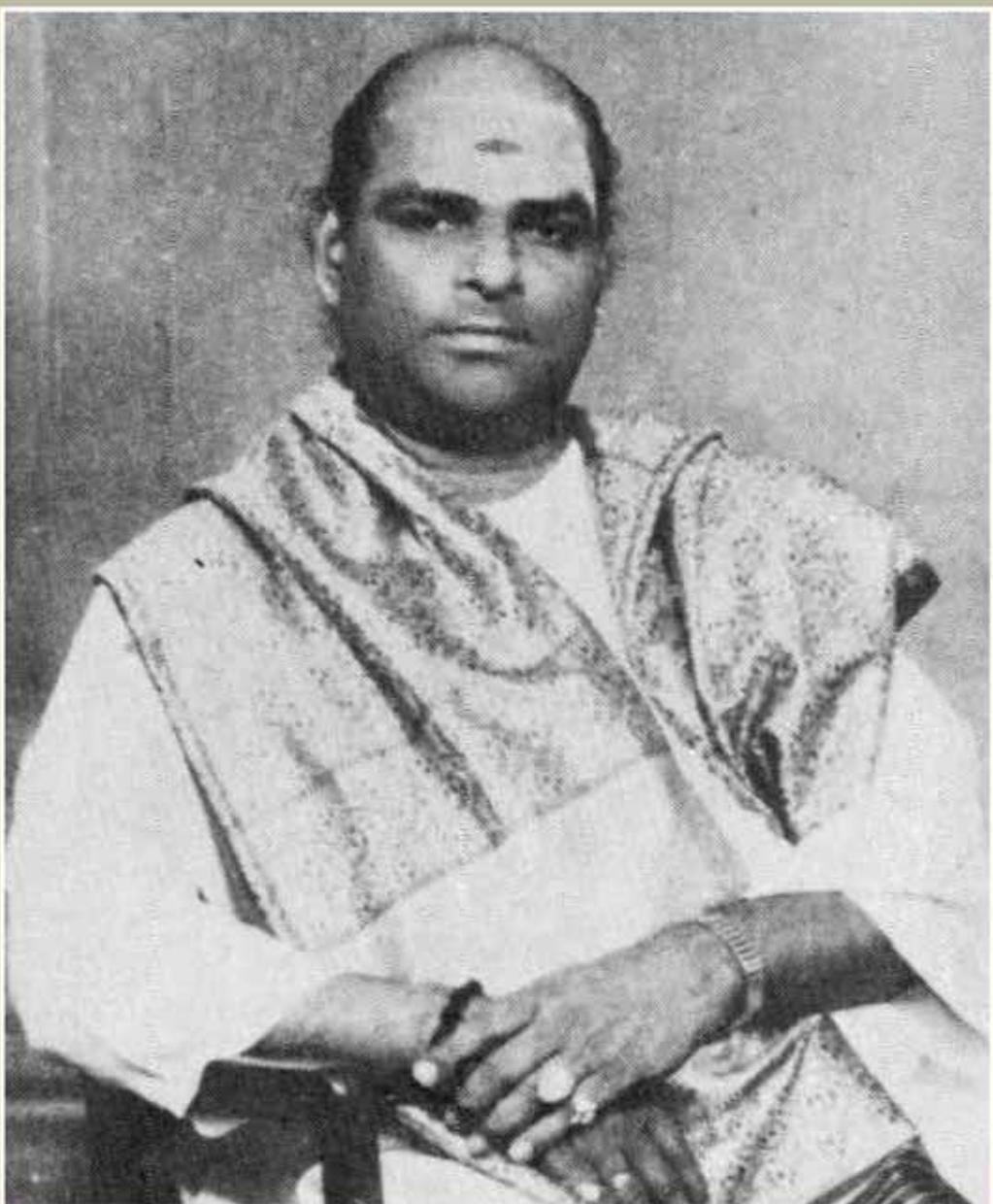


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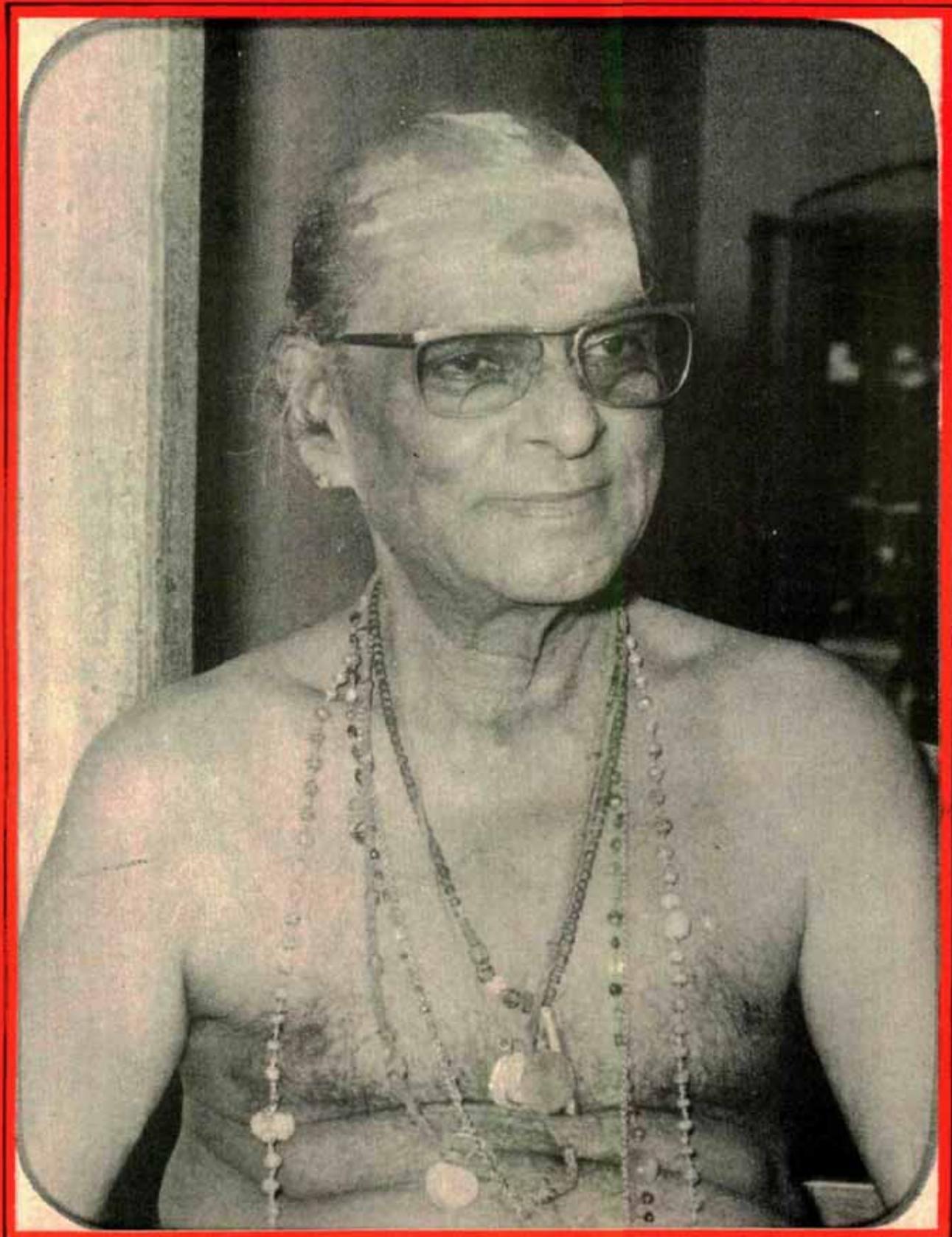
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INDIA'S PREMIER MAGAZINE FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS



VAZHUVOOR RAMIAH PILLAI

Natyacharya – Vazhuvoor Ramaiah Pillai
A Creative Master In Traditional Mould Part I



April 1945. India was still under British rule. A dance arangetram was in progress on Tamil New Year's day in Mylapore, Madras. Bharatanatyam was then gaining new ground and there was a good crowd.

After performing various traditional items, the two girls making the debut danced to the song *Aduvome pallu paduvome*, a patriotic song by Subrahmania Bharati. It was an immediate sensation. While the line 'Sangu konde vetri uduvome'—we shall proclaim victory blowing the conch—was being sung in the background, in the raga Mand, the girls moved to the front of the stage and, arching backwards, they portrayed through gestures the blowing of the victory conch. The audience was thrilled beyond words.

The debutantes that evening were Anandhi and Radha. The particular song

Ramiah Pillai was born to Parthiban and Bhagyamma on 24 December 1910 in Vazhuvoor. He lost his father when he was quite young and was groomed by his maternal uncle, known as Manicka Nattuvanar, with whom he stayed in Mayavaram (now known as Myladuturai) for some years. He moved to Madras in 1938, mainly to train actresses to dance in films but he started training Bharatanatyam dancers for the dance theatre also.

Two years from now he will be completing 50 years of service as guru, nattuvanar and choreographer in Madras where his son Vazhuvoor R. Samraj now presides over the Vazhuvoor Classical Bharatanatyam Art Centre established by the maestro.

Ramiah Pillai has travelled all over India conducting recitals of his disciples who include many who have been prominent in the field for many years.

The Bharathi Sangam recognized Ramiah Pillai's patriotism in choreographing and presenting on the dance stage such freedom songs of Subrahmania Bharati as *Aduvome pallu paduvome*, when the poet's work had been proscribed by the British. It presented him with a merit certificate and a silver shield.

Other honours received by Ramiah Pillai include the title of 'Natyakala Kesari' (1948) and the Sangeet Natak Akademi's award (1966) and the title of 'Isai Perarignar' conferred in 1961 by the Tamil Isai Sangam of Madras. He also received the President's award of 'Padma Sri'.

Ramiah Pillai has served on the committees of both the central Sangeet Natak Akademi and the Tamil Nadu Eyal Isai Nataka Maram. He was active in the latter even from the time it was known as the Sangeeta Nataka Sangam and for some years served as its Vice President. He received the title of Kala Sikhamani from it.

was chosen by Kalki R. Krishnamurthi, Anandhi's father. The music for the song was composed by S.V. Venkatraman. The song was sung by M.S. Subbulakshmi. The dance was choreographed by Vazhuvoor Ramiah Pillai, who also wielded the cymbals.

If he hadn't already, Ramiah Pillai must have realized that, in a combination of new dances based on fresh themes and Tamil songs and dancers drawn from reputable families, he had a foolproof formula for success. What the girls did on this occasion, in a sense, was also to blow the victory conch for their guru Ramiah Pillai.

The critics were full of praise for Ramiah Pillai's achievement. One of them, E. Krishna Iyer, who had toiled hard from the mid-20's to save classical dance from being killed and who had significantly contributed to its revival, wrote :

"Their [Anandhi-Radha's] exposition of Bharati's song *Aduvome pallu paduvome* in duet was so vivacious and inspiring that it carried the audience off their feet, especially when they showed the gesture of blowing the conch of victory and freedom The reason for the excellence of the girls' natya is to be sought not merely in their innate aptitude and talents but in the genius of the nattuvanar who trained them. It speaks volumes to the credit of Mr. Ramiah Pillai of Vazhuvoor, the nattuvanar who has given his best to the girls and combined in them precision in rhythm and variety and artistry in adavu jati patterns and grace and refinement at every step."

Rasikamani Chidambaranatha Mudaliar wrote in *Kalki* :

"I am all praise for Natyacharya Vazhuvoor Ramiah Pillai's knack in gauging the children's mentality and potential and in instilling in them, with gentleness and encouragement, the nuances of the art. Ramiah Pillai has introduced a new genre in the world of dance. He has choreographed exquisitely the Bharathiyar song *Aduvome pallu paduvome*, introducing jati-s, adavu-s and abhinaya."

Editor Srinivasa Rao wrote in *Naradar* :

"It looks as though [Ramiah Pillai] has decided to continue canvassing the elite and win laurels for himself. When I saw him at Mylapore the other day, seated on stage, he seemed to be as full of happiness as his mouth was with

tobacco. It appeared as though he was planning to teach hereafter only such of those students who would bring him such wide publicity. Ramiah Pillai, you have certainly earned a name! Smart you are indeed!"

Rao's observation was most astute. In those days girls belonging to the elite families of Madras wanted to learn Bharatanatyam from Ramiah Pillai, or rather their mothers wanted them to do so. Using this to his advantage, very soon Ramiah Pillai established himself firmly in the art world. Hemamalini, daughter of the senior police officer C.K. Vijayaraghavan; Hema, daughter of C.A. Ramakrishnan I.C.S.; Vijaya, daughter of Ramakrishnan's brother C.A. Subramaniam; Sarala, daughter of T.S. Duraiswamy of the TVS family; Vyjayantimala, daughter of Vasundara Devi—these were some who learnt dance from Ramiah Pillai at this time. The cars belonging to their families would wait for hours outside his home. What the satyagrahis of the freedom struggle later achieved, Ramiah Pillai attained without any sacrifice on his part. He rode in cars with a police escort. The police van would pick him up and also drop him back after his tuition to Hemamalini Vijayaraghavan. Even if he was late for his classes of his other disciples, he would always be on time for her classes, although she did not—obviously could not—perform the dances he had choreographed using patriotic songs, like *Aduvome*.

Even before these dance aspirants became his disciples however, Ramiah Pillai already had a star student in Baby Kamala. In the early 1940's, she was a rising star. She had initially learnt Bharatanatyam under Muthukumara Pillai and made her debut in 1939 when she was but six years old. She had also learnt Kathak from Lacchu Maharaj. She had danced in the film *Ram Rajya*. She was a twinkling little star already. And it was she who put Ramiah Pillai on the road to fame and fortune, by becoming his disciple and dancing all over India under his baton. By the mid-40's, the Vazhuvoor cult was well-established and Ramiah Pillai had eclipsed many an old-time guru in popularity.

But it was not as though Ramiah Pillai himself brought little to the winning ticket. He brought to bear on his endeavours as a choreographer and teacher a great family heritage, an aptitude and a

willingness to undertake research, an ability to adapt and innovate, a deep commitment, great diligence, strict discipline, and a sense of humility mixed with piety.

The family heritage apparently goes back several centuries. "The Vazhuvoor tradition has a hoary past," says Ramiah Pillai. We remember reading an article in which there is mention of the existence of copper plates attesting to the Vazhuvoor family's prominence in the dance field. When we ask him about it, he recalls that the late T.N. Ramachandran, of the Archaeological Department, once told him : "You must see the stone inscriptions in the Vazhuvoor temple." The story behind the reported copper plates and stone inscriptions is this. One of Ramiah Pillai's ancestors had taught dance to Princess Kuntavi of the royal family. In appreciation, the king had offered to gift some acres of land to him. Even though this gesture was in conformity with the practice in those times, the guru had respectfully declined the offer, fearing that, if he did accept it, his family's progress in the arts field would be affected. He had therefore requested that the royal patron instead gift the land to the temple of Gnanasabhesa in Vazhuvoor. The king had complied.

Narrating this story in the 1961-62



At an Anandhi-Radha recital

'malar' of the Tamil Isai Sangam of Madras, Professor P. Sambamoorthi had also stated that stone inscriptions relating to this event could be found in the Vazhuvoor temple.

We find later that, although there are some sculptures in the Vazhuvoor temple which are said to depict this ancestor teaching dance to Kuntavi, neither a

stone inscription attesting to the tuition nor the copper plates can be located. But, as we talk to Ramiah Pillai about his ancestors, we feel the vibrations of a great parampara or tradition handed down from one generation to the next.

Ramiah Pillai's eyes brighten as he talks about it. He who has been sitting hunched and tired all this while, sits up

Vazhuvoor : A Deserted Village

Vazhuvoor is about eight kilometres away from Myladuturai and set amidst the lush green of Tanjavur district's farm lands. It has a temple and a temple tank, both of a size impressively large for a small village. The contrast is heightened by the fact that there are hardly any people around. The village area surrounding the temple is virtually deserted, reminding the visitor of Goldsmith's poignant description of a deserted Irish village. A once well-peopled village, like many others which similarly boasted of flourishing cultural activities, has lost a large percentage of its inhabitants to the urban centres.

The temple has a large prakara or yard. The stone sculptures are lovely. Paintings on the wall illustrate incidents from the sthala purana or the narrative of mythohistorical events pertaining to the temple. The presiding deity is Veeratteswaran and his consort is Elankilainayaki. In the todayamangalam traditionally offered by the Vazhuvoor school of dance, they are respectively referred to as Krittivaseswara and Balakurambika. The lyrics and sollu-

kattu-s of the todayamangalam come to mind as the visitor looks around and links what is seen with what is sung. The presiding deity is also known as Gnanasabeswar.

M.K. Karuppiah, an employee of the temple, gives the following information. Vazhuvoor is a holy place sanctified by the appearance of the Lord as Gajashamharumurthi to vanquish an asura who took the form of an elephant. The temple dates back to the 11th century. A copy of the sthala purana is not currently available. There is a stone inscription attesting to the gift of land to the temple by the then king, but there is no stone cut concerning the teaching of dance to a royal princess by Ramiah Pillai's ancestor.

A 1984 'Masi Magam' festival brochure he hands the visitor reveals that Vazhuvoor Ramiah Pillai and his family continue to maintain links with their ancestral village, despite having left it years ago. In that year, Jayanthi Rajagopal, a disciple of Vazhuvoor Ramiah Pillai, had given a recital at the festival.

Ramiah Pillai's ancestral home remains intact. It is an ordinary house with a sloping roof of red tiles. But standing in front

of it, the visitor suspects he can still hear the sounds of music—the tinkling of ankle bells, the tat-tat-tat of the thattukazhi, the soft beats of the mridangam and the sweet voice of a singer—from within the house, so strong is the association of ideas. Recalling the story of his ancestors narrated by Ramiah Pillai, the visitor also sees, in the mind's eye, the figures of Samu Nattuvanar and Manicka Nattuvanar, their foreheads smeared with ash, their top cloths tied around their waists, their hands crossed before their chests, their heads bowed, coming out of the front door to offer worship to the temple deities being taken in procession in front of their house.

A villager points to a 'tope'—a grove of trees—which encompasses a small shrine for Bala Murugan and laments: "That used to belong to them [Ramiah Pillai's family] but, alas, they have sold it and moved away."

Not only 'them' but all the other artist-families have deserted Vazhuvoor where, in the recollections of Ramiah Pillai, a number of artists once lived and pursued their vocation with devotion to the Lord and reverence for tradition.

and begins to talk spiritedly. Now and again he falters with emotion and tears well up in his eyes. He speaks first about his ancestral village and then about his grandfather Samu Nattuvanar and his uncle Manicka Nattuvanar, all with real reverence :

"First I shall tell you about my village. It escaped the fury of pralaya [the great deluge] and is hence called Vazhuvoor [Vazhuvya oor—the village that survived]. The village has existed through four yugas [eons]. In the sthala purana, it is referred to as Gnanapuri and Suddhapuri also. The deity of our village is Gnanasabhesar."

He has a simple faith in puranic lore and talks of the four yugas casually as though they span just 40 years.

In a voice tremulous because of age and fatigue, he sings the today-mangalam which he has presented at the beginning of thousands of recitals conducted by him :

*Jaya Suddha Puri Vasa!
Jaya Maha Gnana Sabhesa!
Jaya Gaja Samhaaresa!
Jaya Krittivaasesa!
Jaya! Jaya!"*

"In the evening the arati ritual would be performed for the Gajasmaramurthy," he explains. "This today-mangalam would be sung at that time and tandava jati-s would be recited. It would be fantastic. It would create an illusion of Gajasmaramurthy actually doing the tandava. There are distinct phrases for tandava jati-s recited for the Lord's dance. There are various forms of Siva tandava-s such as dwadasa tandavam, sapta tandavam and shodasa tandavam. Dance would be performed when the deity was taken out in procession. You might have seen this in Tiruvarur. In Chidambaram also, during the Margazhi festival, tandava jati-s are recited."

He sits quietly, lost in thought and as if viewing the Lord's procession in his imagination. After all he is a dance master who sees the dances in his mind before he trains his students to give expression to them. We have to prod him from his reverie.

Have you ever used these tandava jati-s in your compositions for the dance stage ?

"Yes, I have used them in one or two places, where it was appropriate," he



Ramiah Pillai & his guru Manickam

responds. In these jati-s, there are syllables—beejakshara-s—which have the effect of mantra-s. There is a lot of difference between these jati-s and the natya jati-s. The year I was awarded the title of Isai Perarignar by the Tamil Isai Sangam, I recited these tandava jati-s at the Pann research conference. The audience must have been a thousand strong. All the oduvars who were present gave me a standing ovation.

"At the temple, these jati-s were not recited by a single individual. The elders would lead. The sons and disciples would follow in chorus. It is impossible for anyone to recite it all by himself. It would last about an hour and a half. It would be recited in the tara stayi sadja and would be in the raga Nattai. In the higher octave it would go up to the gandhara, while it would reach the panchama in the lower octave. The sollukattu would be recited with cadences. The tandava jati-s are different from mallari.

"The natyacharya of the village would recite the jati-s, accompanied by suddamaddalam. The beauty of the sollukattu

and the rhythms of the suddamaddalam would make even a person with no knowledge of these enjoy it all the same.

"I have a cough and I get breathless, but I shall recite it now nevertheless [Recites] :

*Tam tam tam kita thaka thakita
kitathakita*

*Tam tam tam kita thaka thakita
kitathakita*

*Thaka ganga taddheem ganga tad-
heem*

"Have you ever heard ganga tadheem ?" he asks and continues in the same khanda nadai:

*Gathi tha dhana thanatha jonu
Jonutha dhimi kitathaka thakita*

He recites the tandava jati in Nattai raga with great enthusiasm for about two minutes and then switches from khanda nadai to tisra nadai. *Dheemtha dheemtha
dheemtha tham*.

It is most enjoyable to listen to him. We can even visualise the sandhya tandava (twilight dance) of Nataraja accompanied by Nandi playing the mridangam.

But suddenly Ramiah Pillai stops and asks : "How will you write all this down ?"

Lost in the beauty of the sollukattu-s and his sonorous rendering and the vivid picture of the tandava nritya, we hadn't really thought of transcribing these into words. In any case, the beauty of the sollukattu-s cannot be described. One has to experience them by listening to them in the right atmosphere and with bhakti in one's heart. It is not customary to include tandava jati-s in Bharatanatyam. And perhaps there is none else who knows these jati-s today.

"These have been composed in the five nadai-s and all the various speeds," he informs. "There will not be a single harsh syllable like *thakita kitathaki, dhikkutta kitathaka*."

Ramiah Pillai goes on :

"Now about my ancestors. There have been not only natyacharyas among them but also veena vidwans. And also mridangam vidwans and nagaswaram and tavil vidwans. If a person had three or four sons, at best one among them who had the right aptitude would be trained in nattuvangam and launched as a natyacharya. This practice has been continuing for centuries. I know because the family history has been passed on to us by word of mouth from generation to generation. There's some substantiation also available.

"The earliest ancestor I have heard of is Nagappa Nattuvanar. There is also a Pithu Nattuvanar, named after Pitharanan, a local Vazhuvoor deity. Nagappa Nattuvanar's grandson by his daughter was Veerappa Nattuvanar. He was a great dance-master famed for his deep knowledge. My grandfather—and Veerappa Nattuvanar's grandson—was Samu Nattuvanar. A contemporary of Pandanallur Meenakshisundaram Pillai, he was well-versed both in theory and practice. I've a picture of him. I also have a picture of Manicka Nattuvanar, my mother's brother. My father was called Babji ; his real name was Parthiban. My mother was Bhagyamma, Samu Nattuvanar's daughter.

"Musicians in our family included Vazhuvoor Muthuveer, a contemporary of tavil vidwan Needamangalam Meenakshisundaram. His father Ponnusamy played the mridangam. People used to be in awe of him. These were all musicians who had reputations as matchless artists.

They did not play the instruments merely to make a living.

"In those times, every village was home to a number of musicians. Vazhuvoor Veerasami Pillai, a famous nagaswara vidwan, was among them.

"Tirumarugal Natesan, uncle of Tiruvaduturai Rajarathnam Pillai, was particularly adept in rendering brika-s. Rajarathnam followed his style. Chinna Pakkiri of Mannargudi was reputed to have played even better than Rajarathnam. He used to play while the deity of Rajagopalaswamy was carried out in procession and I believe that after his death, others hesitated to take his place in the procession. These villages were all within a radius of ten miles around Vazhuvoor."

We can see very well how proud he is about his family. Maybe they were wonderful artists. We want him to tell us more about the nattuvanars and dancers who belonged to his family and his place.

"There have been many dancers", he says, resuming the narrative, but pauses as if to recollect. He adjusts his zari angavastram and closes his eyes. He is very conscious of his appearance even at this age. A true artist indeed! He walks with a limp because of a fall which caused a fracture of his thigh bone, yet he carries himself with dignity. He has always got along with all sorts of people.

Perhaps that is the secret of his success as a dance teacher both on stage and in films. When he talks, he does so gently and his voice is barely audible above the whirr of the overhead fan. He opens his eyes now and starts talking again.

"My grandmother Balambal was reputed to have been a good dancer. I have seen her when I was a boy. I remember she was powdering betel nuts in a mortar at that time." There is an impish laughter in his voice when he says that.

"Vazhuvoor Nagamma Amma who learnt dance from Samu thatha was very famous. She danced at every samasthanam [princely estate] in Tamil Nadu. It was the maharajas and princes who patronised and encouraged the arts. Dancers at Ettayapuram, Ramanethapuram and other samasthanams in Tamil Nadu were patronised by them and awarded titles. In those days it was customary to present the artists with gold thodas, chains and so on.

"Titles are common only now. They were not at that time," he adds with a laugh. Also laughing, he says that the artists travelling from place to place had to ride oxens. Apparently, carts would not be used because not all places were connected by carriage ways. While those who knew horse-riding could use horses, others, like Siva, had to depend on the rishaba vahana or had to foot it. "My



A family group : (sitting) Ramiah Pillai, Vinayakam, wife Gnansoundaram (standing) disciple, Mani Pillai (brother) Samraj & his wife Kamala, disciple

elders have told me how, even in the last century, the Chinniah-Ponniah brothers came riding on oxen to worship in Vazhuvoor," he says, as if to emphasise he wasn't just telling a cock-and-bull story.

"Samu nattuvanar went to Mysore. Nagamma Amma danced there. The maharaja wanted to see the dance again the next day. My grandfather was thrilled. In order to show his gratitude, he composed a tillana in the raga Surati on Chamaraja Wodeyar and had it performed the next day. At that time Poochi Srinivasa Iyengar was the samasthana vidwan."

He sings a snatch from that composition. *Dhitham thiranaa dhiru thom thiranaa valapu nilupa thaala jaalaraane. Chamaraja Bhoopathi gambhiraan.* There is a catch in his voice and he pauses. Recovering himself he adds: "Poochi Iyengar exclaimed *Sabaash Samu*. Thereafter the maharaja honoured my grandfather and presented him with a thoda."

We want to know if he has in his possession any of the ornaments given as royal gifts. "No," he explains, "they were sold for buying lands."

Ramiah Pillai readily admits that he becomes emotional when he talks about the greatness of his ancestors. He gives no indication of an inflated ego but he is justly proud about them. He talks simply, reciting mere facts as he had heard his elders talk about these incidents.

Referring to the song composed by Samu Nattuvanar extolling the Mysore maharaja, we want to know if narastuti or the praise of Man, is to be admired in a poet or a composer. He is piqued.

"Is everyone a swami? Besides, it was customary for an artist to express his or her regard for the patron. This was a respected practice. While the artists generally sang in praise of god, it was still the practice to sing about rulers of samasthanams, in order to please them. I don't consider it was wrong. They were pious, sincere and upright and that is enough. Going through history you will find many a great composer had done the same thing."

We ask : how could a dignified audience sit through a performance when a young danseuse sang and danced expressing sringara or romantic feelings towards the monarch who was also in

their midst?

"Sringaram there was not the kind of mundane sringaram you may be thinking about," he replies. "There is a beautiful form of sringaram. Natarajamurthy has himself performed sringara tandavam. There is indication in Agastya's sutra-s that the Bharatanatyam of today had its origin in Sringara Tandavam. This was even before Bharata's time."

He goes off the track. It is difficult to bring his attention back to sringara in royal courts.

"Four thousand years ago, Rajasekhara Pandya, the ruling king, was in the habit of worshipping Nataraja at dawn. He wanted to learn dance. He was told that he could learn it from Agastya who was living in the Podhigai hills. He learnt the art, but the strain of it left him physically exhausted. Pitying Nataraja, he exclaimed *Oh Lord! I got tired so soon. How should you feel, dancing forever with one foot raised?* At this, Nataraja is fabled to have changed his stance and to have raised the other foot. Manickavachakar has sung about the deity lifting the other foot. Agastya's *Koothilakkanam* was written for Rajasekhara. Agastya had a disciple called Koothan, who wrote the *Kootha Nool*. The Eyal Isai Nataka Manram in Tamilnadu has published the text from the palm leaf manuscripts relating to these."

We remember a great Tamil scholar, M. Arunachalam, saying that *Kootha Nool* is a fraud. But we are not interested in *Kootha Nool* or Agastyar now. We are interested in Ramiah Pillai and we tell him that gently.

"Yes, we were discussing my grandfather, weren't we?" he asks and gets back on the track. "He trained a number of dancers who became well-known, like Alamelu, Nagamma, Rukmini and Jagadambal. The last-named was from Madurantakam. Her bhavam was superb. Dhanammal who rarely approved of anyone was pleased with her dance. Whenever Manicka Nattuvanar conducted Jagadambal's dance, Dhanammal would watch for long hours and extend her praise without fail. Jagadambal danced even when she was 70 years old. Don't be shocked! Didn't Bala dance even after she had entered her 60's? [It was from Jagadambal that E. Krishna Iyer first learnt Bharatanatyam and it was from her again that Ramiah Pillai himself learnt abhinaya]. A surviving grand-daughter of Jag-

dambal is herself about 70 years old now ; because of her penury, the Government is paying her a pension which I recommended.

"Jagadambal, Vazhuvoor Nagammal, Vazhuvoor Balambal, Tiruvarur Gnathanthamal, Tiruvalaputur Kalyani Ammal, Tanjavur Veenabhashini Ammal—all these were famous dancers and were more or less contemporaries. There were one or two others.

"Kalyani Ammal's dance was very good indeed. Her guru was Suryamurthy who was also the guru of Pandanallur Meenakshisundaram Pillai.

"I saw Veenabhashini Ammal only when she was old. Even then she was very beautiful. She sang while doing abhinaya. Her daughters Raja and Bala danced too. She treated me like a son.

"There was one Andalammal in Tanjavur. Neither she nor Veenabhashini Ammal would rest content with what they were taught by their gurus. They were highly imaginative and creative. Then there was a dancer named Saradambal. I saw her do abhinaya—at home. It was marked by 'talukku' and 'kulukku'—grace and verve."

Ramiah Pillai now wanders on to dancers of a later period and, after referring to the pair Bhanumati and Varalakshmi and also to Swarna Saraswati and Balasaraswati, arrives at Adyar and refers to Rukmini Devi. "Raja Chandrasekhar produced a film called *Raja Desingh*," he notes. "And Rukmini Devi danced in it, her husband Arundale providing a commentary. She did abhinaya for the padam *Padari varuhutu*. I'm not sure this film was released but, when I was choreographing the dances for another of Chandrasekhar's films, he projected it on the screen for me. I have, of course, seen Rukmini Devi perform on the stage also. I've seen all important dancers. And I accept that which is good. One need not pick on the flaws. That's my principle."

We want to know how he became interested in dance and who taught him.

Ramiah Pillai now talks about himself.

"My grandfather Samu Nattuvanar died when my mother Bhagyamma was only six years old. My father died young. My uncle Manicka Nattuvanar, was my guru from my childhood. He was famous as a dance-master and it was he who trained a leading Ceylonese dancer of

those times known as Ranjana. My uncle's sons and I used to dance in the silamba koodam which encompassed an area 12 feet by 20 feet. Pictures of Nataraja and other gods and the musical instruments were on one side. The elders would offer worship to them and then we would start our lessons. There was no other place to conduct the classes and therefore one lesson would follow the other. We would break at one o'clock in the afternoon, have lunch and rest a lit-

tle. The classes would resume at four o'clock and continue till seven or eight. I conduct my classes now in the same pattern.

"We learnt music also. We had to learn janta varisai and saptatala alankara-s, we had to do akara sadhakam. It was a 'must' to learn Tevaram

pronunciation if one knows Telugu. A special master taught us Telugu from a book called *Pedda Bala Siksha*.

"We were very young and we used to run out and play in between lessons! My cousins all died young. New disciples came and went.

"Our elders would take or send the disciples to the temples to discharge hereditary duties. They would command : *Ele, go to the temple*. When so ordered, I would go to the temple and recite the jati-s and play the cymbals. Singing hymns was one of the shodasa upachara-s. The odhuvar would sing and I—or whoever else was sent to the temple—would join in. The tala would be played solo and it would be followed by instrumental music. Thereafter the dance. Each would last about two or three minutes. All the upachara-s had to be gone through before we could return home. Our elders shared the salary and the paddy received from the temple with the disciples.

"In the Perumal temples, pasuram-s used to be sung and we joined in. It is this that later on inspired me to set pasuram-s like *Pachai ma malaipol meni* in the varnam format."

Suddenly Ramiah Pillai sits up as though he is going to utter something extraordinary. What he does is tell us about his moving to Madras, a turning point in his life.

"I, who spent the time thus between my home and the temple, came to Madras in 1938 all of a sudden. Before that I spent some time in Mayavaram. I assisted my uncle in teaching there. As long as he was alive, I never taught anything on my own. He used to say : *Ele, teach the adavu-s*. And I would. If he asked me to supervise silambam, I did that. I started on my own only after I came to Madras. Raja Chandrasekhar, the film director I mentioned before, invited me to come to Madras and teach dance to those who performed in films. Apparently, no one else was forthcoming. My elders permitted me to go and I agreed. It was then that I started in films. There was no studio in Madras then. Films had to be shot in Calcutta. Later the Newtone Studios opened in Madras. Films were shot there too. Whenever there was a dance sequence in films, I was called in.

"Whatever I taught and choreographed was pure Bharatanatyam. Not to



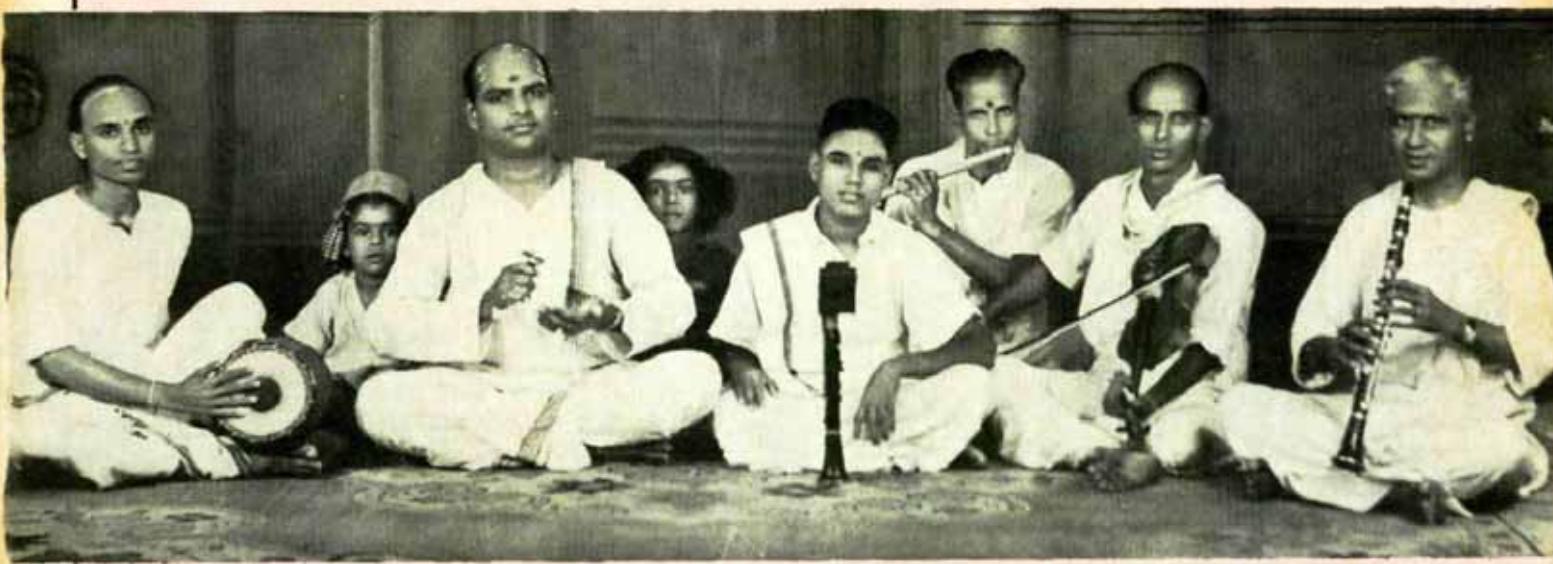
Jagadambal

tle. The classes would resume at four o'clock and continue till seven or eight. I conduct my classes now in the same pattern.

"I learnt everything that was taught there in that silamba koodam : adavu-s, jati-s, sastra-s, everything. The girls learnt only dance. We would watch them. To those of us who were being trained for nattuvangam, other things were taught too. At a very tender age I

and Tiruvachakam. We used to sing a few varna-s. Kriti-s came later. Kshetrayya's pada-s had not come into vogue at that time. It was only after I had started pursuing my career as a natyacharya that I learnt his pada-s and their significance.

"We learnt Telugu as part of our dance training. The Tamil language lacks Sanskrit sounds ; Telugu has them. It is easy to learn Sanskrit and its correct



Ramiah Pillai & orchestra

Muthukumara Pillai & Ramiah Pillai



22-3-59

Kamala at first. She came later. Her parents requested me to teach her. Prior to that, she had danced in one or two films. I remember that she had learnt Kathak. At that time I was very busy in films. Since there were no other dance teachers, I was in great demand. A dance sequence for the heroine would be improvised. Films owed their popularity to dances. I had to compose an appropriate dance for the given situation. Then I had to teach the dance, attend rehearsals, attend shooting. I had to teach even those who had never learnt dancing, but I taught only so much as was required. And I taught in a manner which made learning easy. Yet it would take four to five months for a performer to learn foot movements, hand gestures, facial expressions and the mudra-s. This done, I would add the finer touches which would render the dance more appealing."

Among the actresses he taught this way were T.R. Rajakumari, K.L.V. Vasantha, M.V. Rajamma and Pasupuleti Kannamba. In the film *Ashok Kumar*, Kannamba danced to the hit song, *Unai kandu mayangata perkalundo*, rendered in Bhairavi by M.K. Thyagaraja Bhagavatar.

Many others—such as Yugalakshmi and Kuchalakumari—also learnt from Ramiah Pillai to dance in films.

As far as dance sequences in films made in the South were concerned, Ramiah Pillai had a virtual monopoly then. He was the dance director in almost all AVM films. "They never called anyone else," he says. "There was no one else! Besides, I commanded respect. I never behaved in such a manner as to attract disrespect or to

cause displeasure. In speech and behaviour, I was pleasant. I had no rival at that time. Only after a number of years did dance masters from the North arrive on the scene."

"I was so busy in films, I had no time for tuition really. One of the first I took as a Bharatanatyam student was a girl called T.M. Pattammal. She was sent to me by a genius of a nattuvanar named Tirukazhukundram Doraiswamy. He had taught Pattammal and when he couldn't do it any longer because of old age, he sent her to me. I conducted rehearsals and then recitals for her. I taught her some items of my own. She danced in some films too—in *Maya Machindra* and *Daksha Yagnam* I think. Anandhi-Radha and Kamala and others came afterwards. Vyjayantimala learnt from me from her eighth to her sixteenth year. Then she became a film actress and the teaching stopped."

He started teaching Anandhi and Radha after violinist Kumbakonam Rajamanickam Pillai played the role of honest broker and got the girls' parents and him together. At the suggestion of T.K. Chidambaranatha Mudaliar (TKC) who was a close friend of both Sadasivam and Kalki Krishnamurthi, Ramiah Pillai composed dances to ancient Tamil poet Kamban's verses and taught them to Anandhi and Radha. He choreographed new Tamil varna-s too for them.

Children of other elite families were soon placed under his tutorial care. "Following Anandhi and Radha, I got plenty of students, plenty," says he, savouring the memory of those times. "Film director K. Subramaniam brought to me Lalitha and Padmini when they were young. I taught them for a short while. Then Mahalingam Pillai taught them. I composed all the film dances for them. I also composed several ballets. For instance,

the snake charmer and his wife. In it, I devised a sequence where the snake charmer is bitten by a snake. The wife curses it. [He sings the song]. Then the snake comes back and removes the poison. This was a ballet. Both girls were beautiful. And danced well. I have composed ballets for them in a 100 films or more."

Hemalata and Vijaya were entrusted to Ramiah Pillai by their mothers who were ardent admirers of Bharatanatyam and who liked his style after seeing Anandhi and Radha perform. The girls had been learning from Muthukumara Pillai but he had become too old to continue as their guru. So the mothers quickly turned to Ramiah Pillai.

Vijaya's mother recalls the events for us. "He started coming home to teach. He said : *Since they have learnt under Muthukumara Pillai, the adavu-s are*



As mridanga vidwan in a cinema

A 1940 portfolio

With violinist Govindaraja Pillai



With Nehru : (l to r) Samraj, Ramiah Pillai, Kamala & Radha

neat; we can conduct their arangetram in six months. And he did what he claimed. He taught in the most satisfactory manner. He was very sincere in those days."

Vijaya (Rajan) and Hemalata (Sarma) tell us that Ramiah Pillai was a very good teacher. Vijaya: "He never got angry, never scolded us. At the same time he was strict and did not allow our attention to wander." Hema: "We were about eight and nine. Sometimes he would explain the meaning of the songs, but I cannot say we understood the subtleties of the pada-s. We did what we were taught to do." Vijaya again: "On some days he came only after 8.30 p.m. Both of us used to dance sleepily. We learnt *Manavi*, the Sankarabharanam varnam, and the pasuram *Pachai ma malai pol meni* which was already composed by him in the form of a varnam with teermanam-s in between. Almost all the songs he taught us were in Tamil and we learnt only one Kshetrayya padam from him." And Hema again: "He would say *Don't keep your hand so stiffly. Muthukumara Pillai's style is different. Such stiffness is not required.* He was never picky. He was very broad-minded."

Ramiah Pillai had a lot of respect for

Muthukumara Pillai. This is reflected in his recollection of the older master. "He has taught several disciples. Very neat in work. He has even taught Mrinalini Sarabhai. Even at the age of 70 and 80, he used to demonstrate the steps. *Thambi, watch. Let me dance a little*, he would say and then dance. He would recite the jati-s and dance. I would exclaim, *Anna, enough, enough* and entreat him to sit down."

Ramiah Pillai was indeed a good teacher and intuitively understood children, according to Anandhi. One day Radha and Anandhi came home from school and M.S. Subbulakshmi told them that the dance master was waiting for them. Home then was Kalki Gardens, a sprawling house. The girls went looking for him. There was a small, rather dark space between the balconies and Pillai was sitting there on a blue dhurree. "Have your tiffin and come back quick; let's watch a recital," he said. The girls were quite excited. Another four or five children joined them. It was dusk. There were two tiny dolls at the centre of the dhurree. "Watch the magic," the master said. As he sang, *Jigara ki jana jalimka, jigara ki jana*, the dolls danced in rhythm, jumping up and down. He was seated at a distance some three feet away from them. "We were amazed," says

Anandhi. "We could not make out that he was manipulating the dolls with a black string. Even now when I think of it, I laugh."

Jigara ki jana jalimka... was it some kind of gypsy language? We don't know but it is a fact that Ramiah Pillai taught gypsy dances to his young wards. For instance, he composed a dance to verses from Kutrala Kuravanji selected by TKC and Radha performed it. Some time later President Rajendra Prasad came to Madras. The city's mayor who held a civic reception for him recruited Hema and Vijaya to give a one-hour dance recital. Vijaya's parents requested Kothamangalam Subbu to choose the verses from Kutrala Kuravanji and set them to tune. He did gladly, and Ramiah Pillai used them to compose dances more or less like in a dance-drama. Since he composed appropriate jati-s for performing in between songs, it was a combination of classical and folk dance. This ballet was appreciated by the large gathering at the civic reception. Vyjayantimala later learnt it and performed it many times.

Vijaya's mother recalls that Ramiah Pillai taught with a lot of interest when the children learnt the kuravanji dance. "He composed on the spot. He com-

posed jati-s in a novel manner. The abhinaya also came out beautifully. Even though the dominant rasa was sringara, he introduced humour here and there. That was not all. He offered suggestions regarding the dress and the make up. We did not, at that time, know much about make-up. We learnt it step by step." She also says: "He had lots of imagination. His rendering of jati-s fell pleasingly on the ears. He added dignity to nattuvangam." But . . . as his name and fame spread wide and the demand for his services increased even further, he became erratic. Avers she: "Gopalakrishnan, one of his students, had a good voice. He used to sing for the recitals. Ramiah Pillai started sending him for the rehearsals. When he lost interest in this manner, the number of his students also started decreasing."

Of course, it never did to an extent that it affected his standing in the dance world. In any event, a good number continued to learn dance from him.

"Hundreds learnt [dance] from me," he says, when pressed recently to furnish a list, "but I haven't kept any records. Everybody knows about those among them who have become famous."

His son Samraj is the one he has groomed to serve as the pontiff of the Vazhuvoor school or tradition. But, among dancers, the most famous one is, of course, Kamala. She was brought to him when she was seven years old. Since her first Bharatanatyam guru, Muthukumara Pillai, was a traditionalist and an expert to boot, Ramiah Pillai did not have to teach Kamala from the basics. So he gave finishing touches to her train-

ing, imparted to her dance his own distinctive style and taught her new items.

Ramiah Pillai is quick to concede that Kamala is his most distinguished disciple and that she helped him to acquire a great reputation.

E.V. Saroja was another early student and she made a mark on the stage as well as in the cinema. Abhayam (Balamuralikrishna) also learnt dance from Ramiah Pillai around that time.

Among those who learnt Bharatanatyam from the maestro in the 1950's and later—and became well-known as performers—are Kanaka Srinivasan, Komala Varadan, Padma Subrahmanyam and Chitra Visweswaran. Swamimalai Rajarathnam, who is among the foremost nattuvanars today, K.J. Sarasa and S.K. Kameswaran also cut their teeth under Ramiah Pillai's drill.

Of the disciples of the latter period, Kanaka Srinivasan, who now lives in New Delhi, has remained completely faithful to the Vazhuvoor style, even though she has been adding her own creativity to the dance learned from the master. Similarly, Kamala's sister Radha has also remained true.

Chitra Visweswaran's dance has undergone mutations while Padma Subrahmanyam has herself stated that what she now dances is something else that has evolved out of her own scholarship and vision.

In some cases, former chelas of the vadyar from Vazhuvoor have been taken over by other gurus who have given them their own distinctive stamp—for better or worse. And there are many who claim to belong to the Vazhuvoor school, whether they have anything to show for it or not.

Ramiah Pillai taught his daughters also to dance and "such things as arangetram were done," to quote him. But they didn't take to a performing career. To quote him again : "I felt that it was sufficient if my disciples danced. I saw no purpose in my daughters doing it. From the age of five my children remained in the silamba koodam. In a few years, they helped in conducting my classes. But my daughters stopped with that. Both of them are married now. While Samraj continues the family tradition, my younger son Vinayakam, who learnt on his own to play the mridangam as well as to conduct dances, is a light-music composer whose works are presented on

Visiting President Radhakrishnan : Malathi (now wife of Sevanti Adityan), Ramiah Pillai and Samraj



25.9.63. நாளை 23 முத்து வி.ஏ.வி.

radio and tv." Another son works in a bank.

Ramiah Pillai taught dance to a number of students free of charge. He also presented a number of programmes to raise funds for worthy causes. A man of pious disposition, he has earned a reputation as a guru who has conducted himself admirably.

Ramiah Pillai is a widower now. His wife—whom he married when she was only five years old—had a good voice and could sing well but never would sing in front of him. Moreover, she devoted her time almost entirely to taking care of the family. Now that she is no more and that he has virtually retired from day-to-day teaching and conducting dance pro-

grammes, Ramiah Pillai is lonely. We realise how old age is more difficult to accept for those people who have always been busy and wanted.

AN OLD STUDENT
Translated from Tamil by
Sujatha Vijayaraghavan

[First part of a two-part article.]

Vazhuvoor & His Style A Golden Tribute

Kanaka Srinivasan was a starry-eyed six-year old when she came under the tutelage of Ramiah Pillai. Time may have erased the awe and halo surrounding the guru, but it has in no way dimmed the respect for "one of the most gifted of teachers that Bharatanatyam has seen."

Describing "fluid grace and a deep yet subtle feel for abhinaya" as the hallmark of the Vazhuvoor school, Kanaka feels that the caressing quality she seems to impart to her movements is the result of training under Ramiah Pillai. "There was a special quality to each movement which he would emphasise so well in the teaching. A plain *tai-didi-tai*, along with the eye movements, the right incline of the head and a feel for the gesture acquired an aesthetic dimension which was different. He hated any display of raw, foot-stamping rhythm. He taught leaps and jumps with meticulous emphasis on landing gracefully. *Don't give the impression of stamping on cow-dung*, he would say."

Kanaka continues: "This delicacy was not confined to dancing alone, but permeated even the associated disciplines. Even the nattuvangam had a delicate feel that abjured jarring stridency. What a difference it made to the recital! One rarely comes across that kind of non-aggressive recitation of rhythmic syllables these days. For Vazhuvoor even the mridangam player had to cultivate that inevitable feel for tone. He would advise the percussionist to catch the abhinaya mood in the playing. Rhythmic accuracy alone was never satisfactory for him. As for abhinaya, few could equal Vazhuvoor. I still remember his interpreting the line *Kandavar mayanga vedan katti adukiravarkku* while seated on the floor. The variety of sancharis he spun out is still fresh in my mind. My understanding of abhinaya is due to his teaching alone. He was a master at projecting

sringara."

With all these gifts, what can explain the fact that one rarely hears of Vazhuvoor disciples amongst the young reigning the field today? Kanaka ponders the question and then offers an explanation.

"I suppose there is a kind of periodicity and cycle about preferences in the art field. When I joined Vazhuvoor, Kamala was at the peak of her career. Vijayalakshmi, a beautiful dancer who got into the films, was coming into her own. E.V. Saroja was another talented performer. So that was the time when the Vazhuvoor alchemy and magic were much in demand. A great deal of what I have imbibed was by just watching these dancers being put through their paces . . . Public memory is short. People forget the contributions of even a great guru. A new generation takes over."

"As a guru," says Kanaka, changing the subject, "Ramiah Pillai had his temperamental bouts like all great people. One day very close, one day chillingly distanced as he was, we waited for the urge to teach to overtake him. When that happened, he would teach like one possessed and put us through demoniac dancing sessions of four to five hours, unmindful of hunger or thirst."

"People call him an angry person, but he has reasons to be now," she says, continuing. "Everybody knows how great the late Rukmini Devi Arundel's contribution has been. But that does not mean that every achievement in the dance field can be placed at her door. Recently when Krishnaveni danced, the announcement claimed Rukmini as the exclusive choreographer of Swati Tirunal's *Kamala jaasya*. The art world knows that Kamala has rendered this Dasa-vatara varnam more times than people can count and it is to Ramiah Pillai, who visualised this item in the language of



dance, that the first credit should go. And then it was also mentioned in a gathering that to Rukmini Devi should go the credit of introducing a seated nattuvanar, as against the prevailing practice of nattuvanars standing while conducting. V.R. Samraj has told me of the well-known occasion when my guru walked up to the great master, Meenakshi-sundaram Pillai, and entreated him to sit down and do the nattuvangam. *When I myself have done it in the seated posture, I cannot bear to see you stand for the nattuvangam* he said and he was heeded. While acknowledging the significant contributions of one person, how can you forget what others have done?"

Kanaka is confused by the present-day dance situation. "We are confounded by too many teachers and too many students," says she. "People with no training in music and nattuvangam become teachers. I myself started teaching after some trepidation. Nattuvangam is a separate discipline with a whole vocabulary which is different from the adavu jatis. Today all kinds of people are doing nattuvangam. You can't blame dancers, for nattuvanars have become demanding and difficult to get for rehearsals. All the energies of the dancer are spent in organising the orchestra. One can't afford to maintain a permanent team."

LEELA VENKATARAMAN

Kamala & Ramiah Pillai

The Alchemy Of A Victorious Alliance

Kamala was Vazhuvoor Ramiah Pillai's star student. During a recent visit to India from the U.S. where she now lives, she spoke to SRUTI about her training under Ramiah Pillai. Her mother Rajam also joined in to make some observations. Excerpts :

RAJAM Kamala danced in Hindi films when she was only three and a half years old. In the beginning she learnt Kathak from Lacchu Maharaj. We brought him to Bombay for her sake. We found some more students and a class was started.

The first to teach Bharatanatyam to Kamala and to start her on *tai ya tai* was Muthukumara Pillai. During the World War II evacuation, we left Bombay, came south and stayed at Madanapalli. I arranged to bring Kattumannarkoil Muthukumara Pillai over to Madanapalli, found him a house and arranged to have him teach dance. He taught one complete margam. He was the one who taught *Manavi che kona radha*. Kamala's arangetram took place in Mayavaram. It was held at the municipal hall. Muthukumara Pillai conducted it. But he had become too old and couldn't take care of all the recitals. So, one day he suggested on his own : "There is a boy called Ramiah. His sollukattu-s are very good. Maybe you should try him. One day he brought over Ramiah Pillai who was at that time teaching Anandhi and Radha in Madras. Then he started doing nattuvangam

for Kamala. From 1942 he was Kamala's guru. He polished whatever she had learnt already. And also taught new items. He took a lot of interest in teaching her.

KAMALA Amma would also ask *Isn't this song good ?* and ask him to compose dance for the same. He would select songs on his own as well and compose dances.

RAJAM Later Kamala herself suggested to him songs by Swati Tirunal. You know, she learnt music under Narayana Nivas and secured two diplomas.

KAMALA I used to learn compositions like the Dasavatara varnam. Vadyar would compose the dance. He would choreograph the adavu-s and compose the sollukattu jati-s.

RAJAM If he said *Do this adavu or do that,* Kamala would do it at once.

KAMALA Sometimes I would ask him : *Is it nice if I do like this ?* He would reply : *It is good, Kamala. Let's have it that way.* Very broadminded. He was very fond of me because he thought I danced well. He also received a lot of recognition because of me.

RAJAM He won recognition only because of her.

KAMALA Whatever he taught one day, I would repeat exactly the very next day. There would be no mistake. He

Ramiah Pillai Conducting Kamala's recital in Salem, 1949





Ramiah Pillai, Anantharama Dikshitar, Radha, Kamala & their mother Rajam

would say *Well done!* I would feel thrilled. I would practise many times. I had a lot of respect for him. Even now I have a lot of respect for him. There is none to equal him in nattuvangam. He is unique. The calculations in the teermanam-s would be accurate. If he repeated *kita thaka thari kita thom*, there would be absolutely no error. He did not like patch-work. The *thadhanginathom* would fall into place exactly where the song is supposed to commence from. He would not try to fill gaps with a *thaka* or *thakita*.

Tell us about the adavu-s. Did he depart from the traditional ones and do any innovation ?

KAMALA He and I have together formulated some new adavu-s. There are some adavu-s which are very similar to each other. I would try some variations of them and perform in front of him. Such as doing an araimandi adavu in a full standing posture or do it in full mandi, or do it with a bend or a slant. As he thought out the movements during choreography, I would do these variations. He would be pleased very much. He would not consider it impertinent.

How would he teach bhava (facial expressions) ?

KAMALA He would teach it very well. He would demonstrate the abhinaya beautifully. For instance, take Kshetrayya's *Vadevvade* in Bhairavi. He would teach a variety of sanchari bhava-s for it. As we danced, new ideas for sanchari bhava-s would occur. We would thereafter keep improving it ourselves.

Did he give ideas for costumes ?

KAMALA All that was Amma's work. Stitching dresses, colour combinations, make-up, all these were attended to by her. Vadyar's other disciples too would seek Amma's advice on these matters.

ples say that he used to give suggestions regarding costumes and make up.

RAJAM Perhaps he did. It was not required in Kamala's case.

KAMALA He could not sing like a senior vidwan. But he has deep knowledge of music. He knows which raga is appropriate for which song, or which rasa. He would correct and train the accompanying vocalists and direct the other accompanists on the various instruments. He directed the orchestra efficiently. We never had to worry about it. Our job was to go to the stage and return after the programme was over. He spared us from all other problems. But he had no patience for rehearsals. *Don't worry, you'll do well*, he would say. I used to feel scared. I would practise alone by myself and perform at the recital. That would result in his having to follow me during the programme.

Did he teach differently for films ?

KAMALA Certain modifications are required for films. There is a space allotted as camera area. The dance should be restricted to this. Hand gestures and facial expressions should come out beautifully. Close-ups should come out well. If you stretch the arm it might fall outside the frame. My guru was an expert in choreographing within these constraints. Sometimes he would leave it to me. The choreography in *Konjum Salangai* was mine. He said it was good.

Did your Bharatanatyam get adversely affected because you were also taught for films.

KAMALA Not at all. We never did on the stage something that was prepared for the films. The audience would ask for it, but we wouldn't comply.

We are not referring to that. Because of the change in technique, did anyone suggest that the quality of your classical dance per-

formances had gone down ?

KAMALA No. The quality did not go down. You may even put it this way. Classical dance became popular through films. Rukmini had danced *Yaar undanai pol aadaripavar* and *Chindhai arindu vaadi* in *Sri Valli*. These appealed to the people very much. No one can say they were not classical. Likewise *Aaduvome pallu paaduvome* and *Vetri ettu thikkum etta* were first danced by Radha-Anandhi. I danced these very songs in AVM's film *Naam Iruvar*. In *Sivakavi* and *Sri Valli* and other films, was the dance anything but classical ? My stage performances were not affected because I performed in films. The quality of dance was not diluted for films. The standard depends on the performer and her capability, isn't that so ? What is taught should be assimilated and executed. If a film star who doesn't know dancing performs, the result would be according to her standard.

Did Ramiah Pillai himself compose Natanam adinaar completely ?

KAMALA Yes.

You performed the snake-charmer dance, Naadar mudimel. Did he teach you that also ?

KAMALA He taught me the dance for the siddhar song. Later on I remember he taught differently for the film.

What were the tillana-s he taught you ?

KAMALA Tillana-s in Kanada, Khamas, Kedaram, Samu nattuvanar's Kedaram, Surati. Apart from these, also in Athana and Sankarabharanam which are especially beautiful. All these were taught by him.

Hasn't he also composed sabdam-s ?

KAMALA Yes. All the existing sabdam-s were in Telugu. As we needed Tamil sabdam-s, he composed them himself. As for example, *Venu gananai* and *Aadum mayilthanai*. Dance need have no language problems. But when a new varnam or padam is composed, in Tamil or whatever, it only enriches the art. It cannot be denied that the enjoyment is more if the song is in a familiar language. What a wonderful piece is the Dhanyasi varnam *Nee inda maayam* ! What depth ! How beautiful is the Kambhoji varnam *Naadhanai azhaitu vaadi*. Vadyar was proficient in Telugu. If he composed for a Sanskrit lyric, he would go about it only after learning the correct meaning. He would ask a Sanskrit pandit to explain the meaning to him. He took the trouble to find out the various shades of meaning of a song. He was never casual about it.

All those who have learnt from your guru have left him. They fix up their own accompaniments and perform on their own. Any comment ?

KAMALA Some nattuvanars don't get good students, but how many fine disciples my guru has had ! Talk of luck ! Several nattuvanars were envious of him. All his students were good. None was substandard. Padma Subrahmanyam, Chitra Visweswaran, they are famous even today.

Did he teach you theory ?

KAMALA Not much. We learnt theory by learning from

books and by research. That is all. His credo was that it was sufficient to put all the efforts into learning to dance, that it was not necessary to learn theory. He never tried to teach teermanam-s. We used to learn them as we performed. I used to recite it with the talam. His [Ramiah Pillai's] brilliance is apparent in the varna-s he composed and taught. *Pannagendra sayana*, *Kamala jasya*, *Sadhinchane*, *Naadhanai azhaitu vaadi*, *Nee inda maayam*, *Karunai seitida*, *Sakhiye nee inda velayil*, *Pachai maamalai pol meni*, the Ata tala varnam in Sankarabharanam—these were choreographed and taught by him.

Did he get angry when teaching ?

KAMALA He would scold us. If he threw away the thattukazhi, it meant he was very angry. But he would calm down immediately. He used to show a lot of affection. He would bring us pattas [crackers] for Deepavali. He would crack jokes and entertain us. He would recite with tala the lines 'Jabeel kulaamba gubeel gubeel' and make us roar with laughter.

He was very particular about his appearance. After completing his puja he would apply vibhuti and kumkum to his forehead and wear a zari dhoti and silk shawl. Adorned thus, he would electrify the atmosphere by his mere presence on the stage. He had a majestic mien. And he was a very dignified master. He had an endearing manner in moving with people. He would never imagine that he knew everything and that others knew nothing. He would try to find the good points in each person and try to learn them. If you said something that was good, he would accept it. He had real humility. Among his disciples, there were many who stayed in his house, grew up there and learnt the art and went on to become famous. K.J. Sarasa is one of the important disciples who learnt this way. E.V. Saroja also stayed in his house and learnt.

What do you consider is his major contribution to the art of Bharatanatyam ?

KAMALA Vadyar alone is responsible for popularising Tamil pada-s. He introduced Tamil varna-s. He would choose a suitable kriti, add jati-s and choreograph it in such a manner that the abhinaya sequences and the jati-s would occur alternately. Many Tamil songs became famous because he composed dances for them in this manner.

He did not stop with this. In regard to alarippu, I would say that he was the one who introduced the currently-in-vogue manner of singing sollukattu-s in Natai, Sankarabharanam and such raga-s. There are several pieces where he has composed sollukattu-s set in raga-s. For instance, in Kuravanji, others would sing the opening sollukattu-s in the top sadjam, but Ramiah Pillai would render them musically like a malar. They would fall very pleasingly on the ears.

It seems there are a number of Ramiah Pillai's disciples in America today. Do you know them ?

KAMALA Yes there are. But there are also a few who likely never even saw Vadyar, but they proclaim they have learnt from him and carry on their profession. This is because he is respected the world over. But I'm afraid these persons will spoil Vadyar's name.

Hemamalini Arni & Her Guru

An Enduring Relationship

Hemamalini Arni, who lives in Hyderabad, was a student of Ramiah Pillai during the forties. Daughter of C.K. Vijayraghavan, who was then the Inspector General of Police in Madras, she was brought to Ramiah Pillai for training when she was six years old; earlier, she had started learning Bharatanatyam with another dance master named Kanappa Pillai. She also studied with T. Balasaraswati for two years, learning pada-s. She danced under Ramiah Pillai's baton for nearly 15 years. Her devotion to him is very deep and the guru-sishya relationship has continued uninterrupted to this day. She was very happy to talk to a SRUTI staffer about her guru. The following are excerpts :

Please give us your overall appreciation of your guru's contribution.

Bharatanatyam was put on the map of India by Ramiah Pillai, with his prime disciple Kamala dancing in all the cities of India. He made Bharatanatyam interesting to all kinds of people, without sacrificing the classical form. His choreography was excellent. Probably he didn't know that word then, but he made people sit up and watch. The way he built up the performance was unique. Nowadays dancers offer everything that has to be seen during the first part of the programme. But rasikas who watched the dancers trained by Ramiah Pillai knew that the best was yet to come till the end. He had personality and stature and he added dignity to nattuvangam. I consider myself solely his disciple. I never had the inclination to break away from

the Vazhuvoor school of dancing.

But didn't you learn pada-s from Balasaraswati ?

Yes! I learnt 25 pada-s. There was no question about her supremacy in doing abhinaya, especially to Kshetrayya's pada-s.

Did Ramiah Pillai object to your learning from Bala ?

Not at all. On the contrary, when I did abhinaya to the pada-s that I had learnt from Balamma, he used to feel very happy. He was unusually broadminded. When Balasaraswati presented Sarabhendra Bhupala Kuravanji at the Museum Theatre in Madras, I was Vasantavalli and Bala herself did the part of the kurathi or gypsy. Ramiah Pillai came to see this kuravanji and praised the production.

What are the special features of the Vazhuvoor school of dancing in your view ?

The style is sculpturous and crisp. Ramiah Pillai has always held that it is not only the abhinaya that should be expressive but also the nritta. That is why his style is so graceful. Today there is nobody to compare with his way of rendering the solukattu and teermanam-s.

He was an excellent teacher. This too paved the way for his success. He composed according to the talent and maturity of his pupil.

My sister Padmini and I learnt music from Mayavaram Krishna Iyer. Padmini used to sing pada-s for my performances. We learnt music from Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer also for sometime. Master realised how deeply we were interested in the arts. Therefore, in my recitals, when I started doing pada-s, he encouraged me to sing. He also saw to it that I had a mike.

Did you ever feel that he didn't give you enough time for rehearsals or teaching ?

Not at all. He never cut down my rehearsal time. He taught me with affection. His affection for all of us and his trust in my father was phenomenal. He used to look up to my parents. There was a bond between them. As my father was the IG of Police, we were looked after very well wherever we went. He always remembered that and appreciated the way my parents treated him.

Do you keep in touch with him now ?

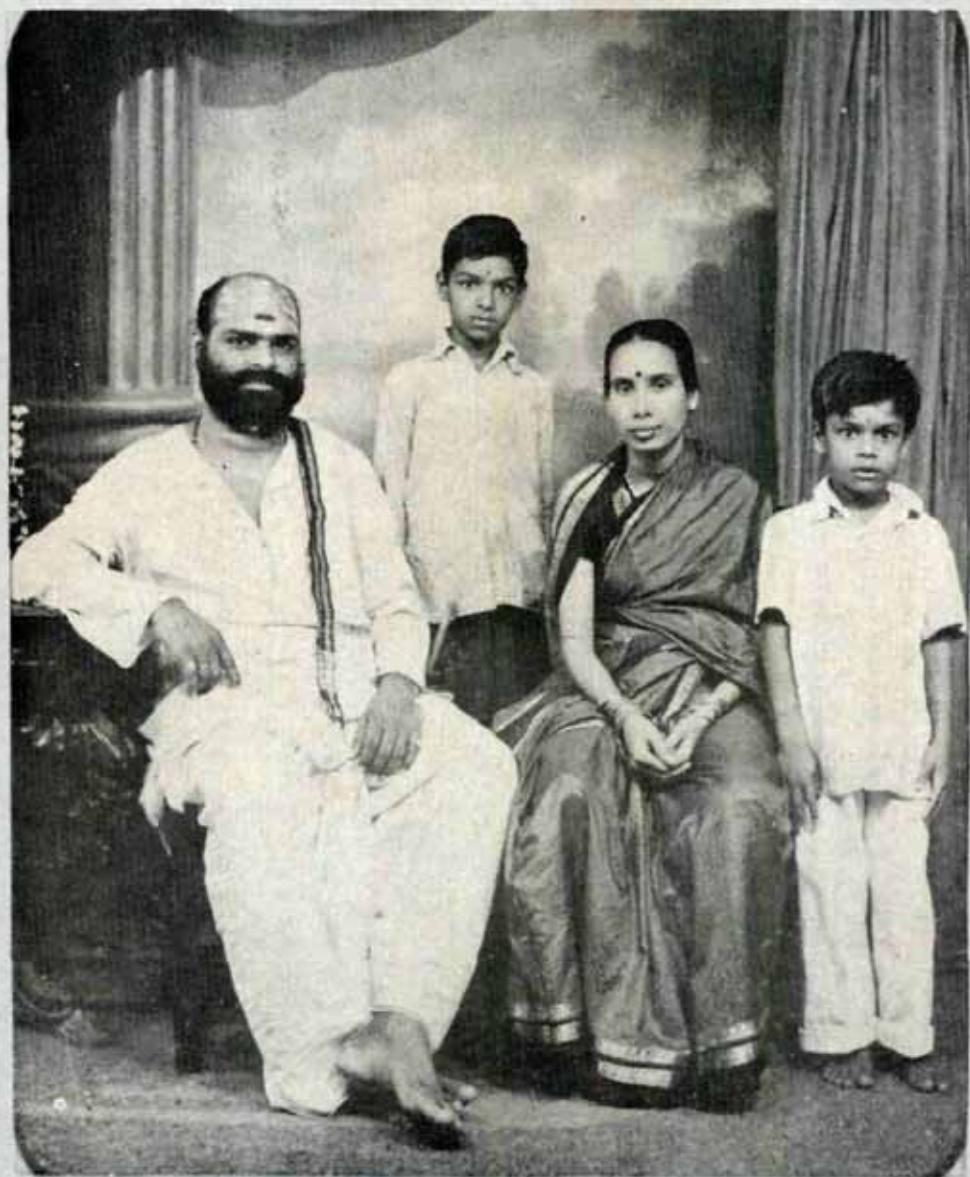
Yes. I am teaching Bharatanatyam to 30 young girls in Hyderabad. I don't call it a school; I teach only those who are really interested. Master is very happy that I am keeping in touch with the art. He willingly helps me. It is such a joy to present my students to him. He has seen all my students dance. His son Vazhuvoor Samraj does nattuvangam for the arangetram of my students.

I have been very lucky to have learnt this art from Ramiah Pillai. I acknowledge it. I feel his other students must also acknowledge it.



Natyacharya Vazhuvoor Ramiah Pillai

A Creative Master in Traditional Mould Part II



Ramiah Pillai, Samraj, wife Gnana Soundaram & Gurunathan

Ramiah Pillai does not perform nattuvangam for any of his disciples who are famous today. Kamala, Padma Subrahmanyam and Chitra Visweswaran all went their own ways quite a few years ago, as did Kanaka Srinivasan, though she does have Samraj occasionally wielding the cymbals for her. We ask Ramiah Pillai the reason for this.

"It is not that I didn't want to do nattuvangam for them," he explains. "The reason has to do with money. When they received 1000 rupees for a recital, they gave me 500 rupees. When they received several times that, they wouldn't give me half of it any longer. They could find others who'd conduct their recitals for even two or three hundred. There have been recitals without any nattuvangam even!"

Could there have been other reasons as well? If a disciple continued under

the guidance of her guru forever, she might find it difficult to give rein to her own imagination or to choreograph on her own. She might be afraid that the guru would consider her impudent. In the circumstances, those with new insights of their own born out of research and the urge to try out new ideas might decide to slip away from the master's shadow. We ask Ramiah Pillai whether he would have objected if any of his famous disciples had tried to introduce innovations or changes in what he had taught them—even while they continued to dance under his baton.

"No," he replies firmly and then, switching tense, he adds: "If they have a good idea, I'd gladly accept it. I'd ask them to retain it. But if somebody tries to improvise something after learning by half measures, I wouldn't accept it. You may bring your own recipe and cook it,

but it should be edible and digestible."

We ask him for his comment on the complaint voiced by some dancers, particularly the young, that 90 per cent of what they receive for a recital has to be given away to the nattuvanar and the orchestra, and that usually what they are left with isn't enough to buy even a saree.

"Maybe it's true in some cases," says he, "but the front-rank dancers get paid ten to twenty thousand rupees. They shouldn't have any problem. Those who receive much less may have difficulties, particularly if they have to pay the sabhas also to get the chance to perform, but such people are few in number. For the majority of successful dancers, the income is quite good. They just don't give it all up. They retain more than half the amount."

"Let me tell you about the custom in the old days. Then, the income was shared 50 : 50 between the dancer on the one side and the master and the musicians on the other. If there were four musicians, the master would divide the payment received into five shares, retain one and a half for himself, pay one each to the accompanists playing the mridangam, clarinet or other instrument, and give half a share to the person providing sruti. He [the one providing sruti] also had to eat, no? He would, by the way, also wash the master's clothes and run various other errands for him. This was the agreement. Every rupee, anna and paisa would be shared on this basis."

"But let that be. Let me talk about nattuvangam itself. A person doesn't master it easily. He must know music and how to play some instruments, the mridangam. Only then he would have 'laya' at his finger-tips. He must learn and master the tala intricacies also. I'm sure you know about the 35 tala-s and the 108 tala-s. The majority of the tala-s in the 35-group have less than 30 akshara-s or syllables. Since the 108 tala-s consist of six anga-s [divisions], the akshara kalam [duration of syllable count], is longer. For example, in the Simhanandana tala, each avarta [cycle] contains 128 akshara-s. Some years ago I gave a demonstration of this tala, reciting the jati-s, over AIR when K.C. Thyagarajan was the music producer there. The programme was recorded. Someone can request AIR to rebroadcast it. Not for the sake of my fame but it may be of interest and use to several. A

demonstration by Mudikondan [Venkata-rama Iyer] has also been recorded.

"Someone who wants to do nattuvangam should learn all these—music, laya intricacies, the sastra-s pertaining to dance . . . the lot. A nattuvanar should know how to set a tala in the five nadai-s, how to pronounce [the jati-s], how to give the proper stress and intonation and so on. Only then would the nattuvangam shine. It used to be said : *Half is the beats, half is the dance*. The dance can be impressive only if the nattuvangam is proficient.

"Obviously, there should be a separate course for training nattuvanars," he adds, probably recalling his own training. "The course intended for dancers won't do for this purpose."

Then, emphasising that intimate understanding between master and disciples should guide recitals, Ramiah Pillai deplores the practice of dancers hiring nattuvanars on an *ad hoc* basis :

"Nowadays it seems nattuvangam can be provided by just anyone, properly qualified or not. A dancer learns from someone, but has someone else conduct her recitals and a new person provide the music. Or she learns from 10 different people, demonstrates to someone else and asks him to conduct her recitals. Some dancers come from out of town and hire someone locally to do the nattuvangam. There are many cases like these. It is as though whomever wields the cudgel is the keeper of the law. In the circumstances, the conductor just keeps time and the dance is just so-so. The connoisseurs surely know the difference."

We ask him his opinion about women doing nattuvangam and he responds without hesitation. "A number of women do it. I see some of them doing it skillfully. But I don't think there is anybody who is exceptionally good. Sometimes it is even jarring. It is a difficult job. But the wielding of the cymbals is not up to the standard. Most of the syllables are played on the mridangam. Many of them sing well but the feminine voice does not have the weight of a male voice. Also, it is very difficult to keep time with cymbals singing simultaneously."

Ramiah Pillai was well acquainted with nattuvanars like Bharatam Narayanaswami Iyer, Meenakshisundaram Pillai, Chockalingam Pillai and Dandapani [K.N. Dandayudapani Pillai]. He speaks

about them. "Bharatam Narayanaswami Iyer never really approved of any natyacharya. Nor did he approve of any dancer. He used to criticise everybody. By God's grace he was fond of me. *You teach well*, he would say. He belonged to the Melattur Bhagavata Mela tradition. He used to dance in front of the deity Narasimhaswamy. Dance for him was a matter of worship. I haven't seen him dance but I knew he had imbibed the sastra-s and hence the prefix 'Bharatam'. We would listen to him for hours whenever he dwelt on the sastra-s. He was frank in speech. He used to criticise those who posed as nattuvanars. He would pull up an erring dancer and ask : *Why did you do that?* Some persons didn't therefore like him.

"I knew both Pandanallur Meenakshisundaram Pillai and Chockalingam Pillai very well. I have watched the disciples of the 'periavar' [the older one] dance. The adavu-s would be very neat. The rhythmic patterns would be crisp. He himself used to play the violin. He could also sing very well. When he was 17 or 18 years old, he had sung for my grandfather Samu Nattuvanar's nattuvangam. If there was need for a singer from outside, he was sent for. All the villages were within four miles. He has himself told me : *Thambi, when I was about your age, your grandfather used to send for me. I used to sing. I felt nervous to sing after he did but he would urge me on and complement me by saying : Good, you sing well.*"

Tears well up in Ramiah Pillai's eyes as he speaks of the Pandanallur 'thatha'. There is a catch in his voice and momentarily he is unable to speak. He is obviously very deeply moved by his memories of the grand old man. Then he wipes his tears away with his upper cloth and resumes his recollections.

"My grandfather was very fond of Meenakshisundaram Pillai. The latter never forgot this. He said to me once : *Thambi, whenever your grandfather sent for me, I would drop everything and rush to him. I liked to watch him conduct. He wielded the cymbals well.* In the same way, we had mutual regard for each other.

"There was a felicitation for him [Meenakshisundaram Pillai] in Kumbhakonam at which Kamala danced. Three thousand rupees were collected. On that occasion, we were together for two or three days and had long conversations.

He told me all these at that time. Having watched Kamala's dance he said, *Thambi, it is very good. I have seen this style with your grandfather. I have seen Manicka Nattuvanar conduct. I see only now the special features and bhava aspects which I had seen in the dance of Madurantakam Jagadamba Amma and Vazhuvoor Nagamma.* He blessed me. [Ramiah Pillai sheds tears again]. He was a genius. Well versed in Telugu. There are very few who know music, language, dance and nattuvangam like Meenakshisundaram Pillai did. Pillaival knew Sanskrit as well. Nowadays people don't even learn Tamil. They are satisfied if they can do concerts.

"Chokalingam Pillai also had regard for us. He used to come home. He taught at a dance school in Egmore. Among his students there was one Kausalya who danced particularly well. [G. Kausalya later served as Collector of Customs. She died in an air crash.] After her, I haven't seen anyone of that calibre among his disciples.

"Both were good natured. They were free from envy and jealousy. That is why it was possible to know them so closely."

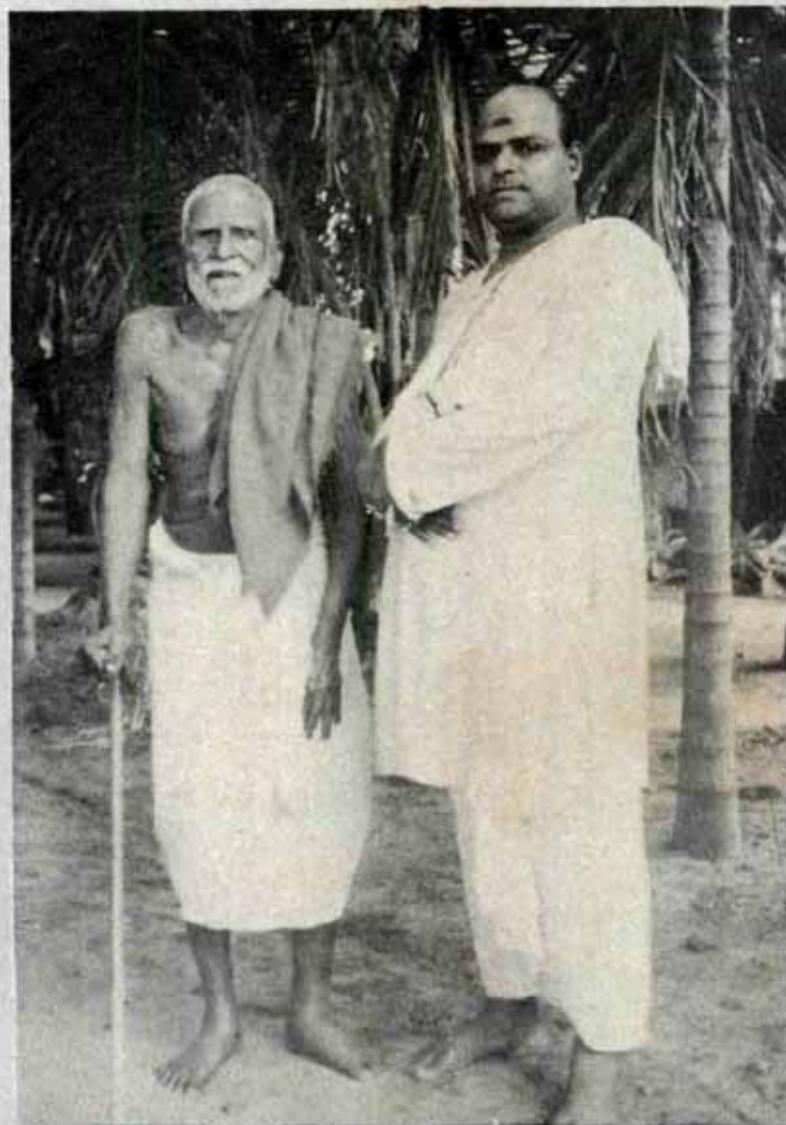
We wish to know whether there were any links between the dance masters of Tanjavur and those of Vazhuvoor.

"The Vazhuvoor tradition is an ancient one; it is unique," Pillai asserts. "The Tanjavur family came into being only during the times of Serfoji Maharaja. Pandanallur Meenakshisundaram Pillai has himself told me about this. The Tanjavur Quartet—Chinniah, Ponniah, Sivanandam and Vadivelu used to live in Mannargudi. Their father Subbarayan was an oduvar. When the Maharaja went to that town he heard them sing and brought them over. They learnt nattuvangam, music and veena from samasthana vidwan Mahadeva Nattuvanar. The latter had a son too. He was also a samasthana vidwan. But why elaborate on this now? We had no artistic links with them. There were no ties by marriage either."

The history he narrates is obviously based only on karna parampara, the oral tradition. He continues :

"There is a lot of difference between the Pandanallur and Vazhuvoor styles. They knew it, even as I know it. *There's nothing wrong in it.* Pandanallur Pillaival once told me.

"He [Meenakshisundaram Pillai] lived in a manner befitting a natyacharya. As



Pandanallur Meenakshisundaram Pillai & Ramiah Pillai

you know, he went to Kalakshetra in Adyar for Rukmini Amma and stayed there for a few years. One day he came home and said to me : *Thambi, I am not able to stay in Madras. I am going to my native place.* Shortly thereafter Chockalingam Pillai also left Kalakshetra. It was at that time that Nagaswaram Veerusami Pillai told me that a person to do nattuvangam was required by Kalakshetra. I said I would arrange for it. There was a boy called Dandapani [Dandayudapani] in Mayavaram. He was the son of the nagaswara vidwan Karaikal Natesan. I told Veerusami about that boy. Later I wrote to him and asked him to come over to Madras. When he did, I told him : "There's a job for you at a place where people like Meenakshisundaram Pillai and Chockalingam Pillai have taught. You can have it but don't work there with just a salary in mind. Stay at least for three years. You can improve your knowledge. Train yourself to wield the cymbals. The style is

that of the senior vidwans in the field. The institution nurtures the art. He stayed there for some time before he came away."

Since he is now talking about Kalakshetra, an institution which has given the lead in producing beautiful dance-dramas, we ask if the growing popularity of the dance-drama has affected solo Bharatanatyam in any manner. He emphatically denies any adverse impact and adds :

"There's nothing wrong in doing dance-dramas. I have myself choreographed and produced them. . . . *Kutrala Kuravanji, Kumaresar Kuravanji, Kapilai Natakam.* . . . A variety of bhava-s can be more easily depicted in a dance-drama and audiences enjoy such fare but there should be an undercurrent of devotion. Also one should know how to select themes suitable for dance. All subjects are not suitable for dance-dramas. Formerly the Kuravanji alone

was done as dance-drama. It was done in the temple in Tanjavour. Jati-s were included in suitable sequences and recited in the top sadjam. I have witnessed it. I was inspired to try out new ideas. My concern was to beautify it even more. Following me, my son Samraj has taught dance-dramas to his disciples. They have earned a good name too. *Alli Tirumanam* was very popular.

"That lady [at Kalakshetra] nurtured the art admirably. She started when she was no longer young and learnt dance with sincerity. To the end she toiled hard to nurture the art. It is something to be happy about. The adavu-s performed there are neat. After all Meenakshisundaram Pillai and Muthukumara Pillai taught there, didn't they? Abhinaya is also taught very carefully there. Kalakshetra is indeed a place where great pains are taken in training the dancers."

Ramiah Pillai is, however, not sure that more than one dance form should be taught by any one school.

"When a school teaches Bharatanatyam, it must teach that alone. One master for Kuchipudi, one for Odissi and one for Kathakali mean that students would be tempted to learn all. All styles will get mixed. The lay spectators are not aware of the difference and the integrity of each art form gets diluted. In my opinion it is not right to mix Bharatanatyam and Kathakali for example. Those who learn Bharatanatyam should learn that alone. There is no art about which you can say, *Enough, I have learnt everything*. You can learn Bharatanatyam for a whole lifetime. Kathakali is also like that. I have seen all dances. Each has a beauty of its own. Like flowers created by God. But you must learn only one style. Aren't there mahavidwans who have learnt Carnatic music alone? If you learn a bit of Hindustani also and make a mixture of both, will it really work out? It is not right for students to say I will do this and I will do that also."

We ask Ramiah Pillai what are the changes or innovations he introduced through his teaching and conducting. He responds at length.

"I have certainly not given up anything that is traditional. I have only built on them further."

"As a result of my studies, I felt improvements were possible. I found that some aspects of earlier dance which

were according to sastra-s had been given up. I worked to reintroduce them.

"For example, the 108 karana-s, once in vogue, had been neglected. I did research, I studied the sculptures in the Tanjavour and Chidambaram temples. All the 108 are there. I taught them to my students.

"It was I who started the practice of a dancer striking sculpturesque poses.

"But there are rules regarding what should be done and where. And how. Whatever the dancer does must be beautiful. It is not right to lift the hand or the leg unnecessarily."

"Teaching these things must be done systematically. And with care. For teaching karana-s, line drawings should be prepared and the students trained to follow them. Appropriate songs and jati-s should be choreographed, for if only karana-s are done, it'd be like a circus. The karana-s should come with bhava, raga, tala. They should be taught only to those children capable of executing them; others shouldn't be taxed. Movements appropriate to each person should be selected and taught so that the result will be beautiful. If a student is unable to execute a particular movement, suitable modifications may be made. But the student should be made to practise to achieve competence."

"This is how my imagination worked. I didn't do anything in a vacuum."

"It is not enough to be aware of all these. The teacher must have a sound knowledge of music, must be able to sing. My guru used to start teaching both music and dance together. My uncle and grandfather both would vary the singing according to the context. One should not sing softly in a context which calls for assertiveness. One can sing Athana plaintively or in anger or to express valour. The meaning of the song should be conveyed properly. Yes, those who dance must know to sing. They must teach in such a way that they develop in the students a sound knowledge of music within a space of five or six years. I have kept the musicians with me at home, instructed them to sing each song as it should be sung and then made them sing for recitals."

"Do not know how it was in the olden days? Flute was the main accompaniment to the concert. [Earlier it was the mukhaveena]. Somehow the clarinet came also to be included. It is an

instrument with a pitch of 4½. One Kuppuswami used to play for the recitals of my disciples. There were many in Tanjavour who played the clarinet quite well. Those were the days when there were no mikes. Hence more volume was required even though there were no crowds like today's. The natyacharyas also sang. Even dancers would pause to listen. Connoisseurs would enjoy both the singing and the dancing. Affluent persons would give gifts on the spot to the natyacharya as well as to the dancer."

Ramiah Pillai denies he has created anything new. He admits only to having carried out certain modifications and reintroduced certain aspects which had existed previously but had been discontinued—and these only in accordance with established norms and without deviating from tradition.

"Like I brought back into vogue the teermanam-s," he says citing yet another example. "The teermanam-s are mainly those which were composed by the elders. Sometimes I added some new ideas to them."

Ramiah Pillai did choreograph many new dances, especially to songs in Tamil. He talks about them in response to our request.

"For Papanasam Sivan's *Nee inda maayam* in Dhanyasi raga, I composed everything including the sollukattu. The jati syllables are old, though."

"There is great beauty in both the padam and javali, as far as their music is concerned. This cannot be denied." *Marubari taalalenura . . .* [He sings but is interrupted by a cough.] Once I knew a number of javali-s like *Sarasamulaade*, but I have forgotten them now." He says he slowly gave up teaching Telugu pada-s and javali-s in favour of Tamil pada-s. We ask if this led the cognoscenti to feel that his disciples' programmes had become less attractive.

"Absolutely not," he says, "Instead they could understand and appreciate the items better. A lot of Tamil speaking people started to understand what the dances were all about. As far as I was concerned, I received several honours for this step taken by me."

We want to know whether he started to teach Tamil songs only because others like TKC and Kalki prodded him or whether he himself felt the need for this change. Ramiah Pillai doesn't hesitate to

(Continued on page 44)



With Ravi, Amala & Uda Shankar. Amala learnt a couple of items from Pillai answer.

"If there is merit in what others suggest, shouldn't we accept it? My repertoire included *Manavi che kona rada*. Sivan translated it into Tamil as *Karunai seidhidalahadha* and it was good. Later when Anandhi and Radha danced to the line 'Tiru maada Mayilai nagaril tigazhum Kapaleesa' at the Mylai Sangeetha Sabha conducted by C.V. Narasimhan of the Indian Civil Service, it was appropriate to the place and occasion. That and the fact that the audience could understand the words were the reasons for the appreciation it received on that day. Tirupugazh Mani T.M. Krishnaswamy Iyer offered very high praise. Even I was surprised. After this I taught my students songs from Tevaram and Kamba Rama-

yanam and Arunachala Kavi's *Rama Nataka* compositions.

"But that didn't mean that I ignored Telugu altogether. A dance-worthy song, whatever may be the language, if done with imagination will turn out to be good. I have taught abhinaya even for Tyagaraja's kriti-s. Even a Pancharatna kriti I have conducted as a varnam. I was motivated to do it since Tyagaraja has composed it as swara-sahitya in the varnam pattern. It came out quite creditably. But it is not sufficient if I create it out of my imagination. Those who dance it should also do it with feeling. Following me Samraj also teaches the varnam based on the Pancharatna kriti to his students. Jayanthi Rajagopal performed it at a recital in Coimbatore. MS & Sada-

sivam saw the programme and highly praised this item. I felt very happy about it."

Ramiah Pillai's experiment and its deemed success notwithstanding, we are not convinced that Tyagaraja's kriti-s are suited for dance. For it is a long-accepted axiom only those songs which are laden with deep raga-bhava, which are slow-paced, which have few words and not too many sangati-s are suited for dance. Tyagaraja's kriti-s were composed for singing only. When abhinaya is done for the pallavi of *Sadinchane*, it appears disjointed.

We turn to another subject and solicit Ramiah Pillai's opinion on whether, these days, there is not a tendency to make a drama of a padam and introduce needless story lines, thus undermining the sophistication and delicate expression of sanchari-s. Ramiah Pillai admits that in a way this is true and deplores it.

"They do all sorts of things without knowing what is meant by sanchari bhava. Properly, it is to delineate a subject matter through a number of variations. But now they take up a story and it becomes excessive. Maybe they don't think it is drama, but they want to excel in sanchari and indulge in it. Even nectar in excess is lethal.

"When you depict Valli kanavan [Valli's husband], you may introduce gestures to show how Valli and Murugan saw each other. You should not start the story right from the scene where Valli is born to a deer. You must ponder whether a scene should be done long or short and do it accordingly. That is where the teacher's skill is seen.

"In the past there were people who could appreciate both dance and music. Not that there aren't any today, but there were select audiences then. They could understand each aspect and praise it. We could therefore do abhinaya elaborately, taking a line from a song. For example : 'Yera dani joochi yendhendhu tala chevu', which means : 'Hey you, why do you look at her and indulge in all sorts of wild fancies? It is not right'"

He starts singing in Devagandhari : 'Oorake adhi pakkaku rammante vachuna'. His voice is feeble, yet it is obvious that he is enjoying the song. He stops abruptly and picks up the explanation.

"The Gopi tells Krishna : *That girl belongs to another household. You*



Presiding over conference of nattuvanars

beckon her with signs. Is it right? This may be shown through different types of gestures. *Is it right to call her by such signs?* may be one. *Whatever you have in mind is wrong, if you ask me* is another way of putting it. Here you may depict what goes through Krishna's mind : *What would be its outcome?* You may show wonder. *I am worried about what all these would lead to* may be another sentiment. Thus it was customary to elaborate on the theme imaginatively. A padam would last an hour. The musicians would also improvise. The audience would sit patiently, watching with appreciation. The recital would last many hours.

"Apart from what has been taught by our elders, we must also teach from our imagination to students who are capable. We must also train successors. Otherwise the art will vanish. I have been doing both."

Ramiah Pillai has not only helped quite a few youngsters to learn dance but has given training to many in dance music and nattuvangam also. Two of his disciples, Gopalakrishnan and Sarasa, used to sing for the recitals. Both of them were very young at that time. It was pleasing to listen to them and their voices used to blend well. Not only those who learnt dance from him but also those who were singing for the rehearsals and performances by his disciples, later on made a name for themselves as teachers. Gopalakrishnan who was talented and earned a good reputation as a dance teacher died young. S.K. Rajarathnam and K.J. Sarasa have many students. But Ramiah Pillai doesn't talk about them. Probably he nurses a grievance because they left him.

Hemamalini Arni is running a school in Hyderabad. Samraj conducts the arangetrams of her students. Hema, who learnt music from Mayavaram Krishna Iyer, herself sings. "I shall accept if knowledgeable people teach," says Ramiah Pillai. "I am, of course, proud of my disciples. They have spread the Vazhuvoor bani. Many of those taking up this bani visit me. If there are mistakes I correct them. They do the old items in front of me. They learn new items. Even now they come."

"Komala Varadan, Kanaka and others started learning from a very young age and learnt for seven to eight years. They are in Delhi and have earned a good name. They teach as well as perform.



My students are there in Calcutta too. Our people who live abroad come here to learn. There is this student Shobana. She is quite well-known in London. Samraj goes to conduct her performances. There is another student over there, Radhika. Both teach there. A month before the arangetram they send their students here. To an extent they undergo some corrections, have their costumes stitched and get back to London for the arangetram. Many girls have come to our school from Sri Lanka. Bharatanatyam is very popular all over the world. Nearly 30 of my students who have migrated to the West teach dance. They run schools. Their students also come a month before the arangetram for the final polishing."

He is genuinely happy at the ripple effect of his teaching. But, as if he is able to read our minds as we wonder whether by merely going abroad the dance could be considered good, he adds :

"I don't mean to say that it is something great to dance abroad or to teach

there. I just mentioned what has been happening, that is all. When foreigners come to learn dance they put in a lot of effort. But their facial features are different. Isn't bhava important for Bharatanatyam? I think that needs a special face-cut.

"We must feel happy about more number of people learning the art. But I must tell the truth. Lot of people learn to dance out of fancy. And they learn from all and sundry. Hence the quality is diluted. Perhaps four out of a hundred come out well-trained. We have to derive satisfaction from that. But sometimes good dancers give up the art. That is a very sad thing. Very sad indeed."

"I welcome anyone teaching what she learnt from her guru. It is sufficient if one teaches faithfully what one has learnt in the proper manner. Then the art will survive."

We ask him to comment on the change in dance since the days of Sadir executed by the devadasis.

He says :

"Dancers who dedicated themselves to the art lived then. Such people are there now also. There were those then who took it up merely to earn a living. Today also there are dancers who do the same thing, no ?

"In those days thin sarees used to be worn in 'kaccham' style, tucked between the legs. The performers used to dance by gas light and petromax light. At weddings and in the temples the recital would last not less than four hours. The performance would be at a sedate pace so that the expressions came out prominently. There would be no set programme. The nattuvanar would bid the dancer to perform whatever he fancied and she would. There would be requests from the audiences also. Dancing would involve a lot of exertion on the part of the dancer. They would be strong and healthy. Do plenty of exercise to keep themselves fit. They would dance everyday and not get tired. Now you see dancers retreating to the wings just after performing two or three items. It was not like that before. They would go in only after completing five or six items. Even if the varnam lasted two hours, they would dance non-stop and then only go in for coffee."

"It is undeniably true that the art of dance has improved in many respects since then. Many changes have taken

Ramiah Pillai travelled extensively in search of materials suitable for new dance compositions. He visited numerous temples in the South. He also studied various authoritative texts on dance deeply. Based on this search and research, he composed many new dances.

According to Professor P. Sambamoorthi, although these compositions have appeared novel, they have really stayed true to established tradition and they have served to underscore Ramiah Pillai's creative ability to show the old traditions in new light.

In an article paying tribute to Ramiah Pillai when the Tamil Isai Sangam of Madras conferred the title of 'Isai Perarignar' on him, Sambamoorthi made the following additional observations :

• Kuravanji and other dance-dramas drawn from Tamil literature have gained beauty because of Ramiah Pillai's choreographic contributions. Furthermore, dances which he composed for verses from Tevaram and Divya Prabhandam have become part and parcel of the repertoire of his disciples. He has also composed dances commendably for the songs of Muthutandavar, Marimutha Pillai, Vedanayagam Pillai, Gopalakrishna Bharati, Desigavinayakam Pillai, Oothukadu Venkatasubba Iyer, Papanasam Sivan and others.

• He has, besides, composed entirely on his own a few tillana-s, jatiswaram-s and Tamil sabdam-s.

• Because of his respect for the purity and greatness of the Bharatanatyam art, Ramiah Pillai has, in the selection of the compositions for teaching to his disciples, preferred those which emphasized the path of devotion. He has justifiably earned a national reputation for eschewing vulgar and obscene elements.

T. Sankaran has pointed out that, as a result of his studies of treatises and temple sculptures, Ramiah Pillai introduced many karana-s and stanga-s newly in the dances he taught his disciples.

place, mostly for the better."

But from what he tells us, it is clear that, during the days of Sadir, there were those who earned and maintained respect and admiration for the art as well as those who besmirched it. As there are today. Yet there was an attempt to put down dancing as a social evil, along with the devadasi system. We ask him to comment. It was Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy who led the attack with determination, he notes in his reply. Dr. Reddy herself belonged to the devadasi tradition. He continues : "There are people at all times who go wrong. Such people were there before and are there now. Later on, what did they do about women who were acting in dramas ? What was done about women acting in the cinema ? But dance itself has survived the onslaught. Support for the art revived as some people did propaganda about the special features of the art. There was a new demand.

"It was a golden age for the art when I began my career as a teacher of dance. Artists came from respectable families which included excellent connoisseurs. The stigma vanished and the art came to be regarded as divine. Such was the environment. This was certainly the will of God. Since this is an art with good traits, it came to be revered. The artists also came to be honoured.

"E. Krishna Iyer contributed much to the renaissance. He did considerable propaganda for Bharatanatyam. He proclaimed that he himself danced. I have seen a photo where he is seen dancing on a pot. He learnt from Madurantakam Jagadamba Amma. He was good in research too. He had a sound knowledge of the art. He would highlight the good points, but would also point out the flaws. He canvassed support for the art through writing in journals, through speeches and by encouraging artists.

"When the Tamilnadu Eyal Isai Nataka Manram was started, it was known as the Sangita Nataka Sangam. E. Krishna Iyer was its Secretary. I was a member of it at that time. Right from the time it was started I have been its member. I have also served as President. You may ask me what I have achieved by continuing there."

He does not wait for us to ask, but goes on.

"I brought about a resolution that artists who are old in age and are poor

must be given a monthly pension. It was decided that it should be an amount of 50 rupees per month. Then it became 75 rupees. In Kalaignar's [Karunanidhi's] time it became 100 rupees. Under the rule of Puratchi Talaivar [M.G. Ramachandran] it has been increased to 150 rupees.

"I suggested to Kalaignar that a lump sum of 1000 rupees should be given to those who were very poor. He agreed and said, *I will allocate one lakh rupees. Deserving persons may be paid from the interest earned.* He made arrangements accordingly.

"I have also been a member of the central Sangeet Natak Akademi. At that time artists from all fields would come from all the States to receive the award. It would be pathetic to see many of them, very old and poverty stricken. I thought, of what use is the award to such people ? So I brought up a resolution that they should be given a grant of 10,000 rupees. The committee felt that the financial position was difficult to give effect to the resolution. Hence we decided to give 5000 rupees. But last year it was decided that 10,000 rupees would be given to the awardees. I received a communication saying that the proposal which I made when I was a member was now being implemented. I felt very happy.

A Master's Humility

The Indian National Congress used to conduct annually an exhibition and art festival on the Congress grounds in Madras. In connection with this event in 1948, it was decided to confer the title of 'Natyakala Chakravarti' on Ramiah Pillai. When he learned about it, the master from Vazhuvoor was taken aback. He rejected the idea, saying: "Even the Cosmic Dancer of Chidambaram is called only Nata-raja. How can I accept the title of Chakravarti which denotes a higher position?" Respecting his sentiments, the organizers changed the title to 'Natyakala Kesari' and he accepted it.

"Similarly, it was I who introduced a resolution that expert artists from various fields in Tamilnadu should be selected every year and given awards. It was decided that such persons would be honoured with a medal and the title of 'Kala Sikamani'. Later at the suggestion of Kalaignar, the title was changed to 'Kalaimamani'.

These are what I consider as my most important services in my life time. Mind you, either for my school or for myself I have not received any grant. Not

giving importance to monetary benefits I have taught several poor children. I have not taken any fees from them. I have provided them with food and clothing and put them up in my house. This is called 'Vidya dhaanam'. Many who learnt thus are famous today. They are quite well off. I feel supremely satisfied when I see that. Some of them still have guru bhakti and hold me in high regard. Some don't. The world is after all like that."

Mahadeva Bharati, the samastana

vidwan of Ramanathapuram, has composed two songs in praise of Ramiah Pillai. The following is their gist :

Nataraja Murthy dwells forever besides Ramiah Pillai, who is revered by men of knowledge. Wherever Ramiah goes, it shall be prosperous with the blessings of goddess Lakshmi.

AN OLD STUDENT

Translated from Tamil by
Sujatha Vijayaraghavan.

(Second part of a two-part article)

A Tradition Carried Forward: Continuity As Well As Change

It has always been like that. When one generation passes the reins on to the next, the handed-down tradition is carried forward but subject to modifications, additions or deletions.

When Vazhuvoor Ramiah Pillai took over the reins from his uncle Manicka Nattuvanar, he effected some changes which reflected his own research findings, perceptions, imagination and skills of innovation. He resurrected certain aspects of dance which had been discarded by prior generations for one reason or another. He reintroduced some disused teermanam-s and brought back the karana-s into vogue. He introduced some ideas of his own too : adavu-s performed in the sitting and half-sitting postures, sculpturesque poses, etc. He started using kriti-s for dance, e.g. Tyagaraja's *Sadhinchane*. He choreographed new dances, especially to songs in Tamil, using Andal pasuram-s, Swati Tirunal's compositions for dance and Bharati's poems. Whether all these re-introductions, changes and innovations constituted 'improvements' is a subject on which there may be differences of opinion but, by his own assessment, he did all these while yet staying within the broad contours of the inherited Vazhuvoor tradition or bani. [SRUTI carried a detailed discussion of the Vazhuvoor bani in Issue 14 published in December 1984].

Ramiah Pillai virtually retired from full-time teaching and conducting in the early 1960's and, from about 1965 onwards, Samraj has been occupying the *gaddi*. Pillai has, however, not completely withdrawn ; he has stayed on as an emeritus professor, giving guidance and suggestions, questioning

his successor if he felt a change or innovation introduced by the latter strained the bani, and in general making the benefit of his experience available.

Samraj inherited the *gaddi* when he was hardly 25 years old. He is a vigorous 48 now—with a couple of decades of front-line experience behind him. He has already prepared a successor in Palaniappan, his son of 23 years. The youngster presently assists him in teaching and has started conducting recitals. He will take full-charge one day—and continue the tradition.

Change goes with continuity. Tradition, in order to survive, must make room for the creativity of its new handlers and also respond to the dynamics of changing environment in order to retain its relevance. The trick, for its custodians, is to accommodate the changes while yet protecting the central core of the tradition.

Samraj, too, has introduced some changes and innovations. He feels they are for the better, although not everyone may agree with this self-assessment.

Samraj is, of course, quite proud of his inheritance. The Vazhuvoor bani, he says, is a vibrant synthesis of 'attam' (natya) and abhinaya, "unlike the Pandanallur style which emphasises the former and the Kanchipuram tradition which lays stress on the latter."

We ask : Isn't it true, however, that very few dancers are good in both aspects? Can little girls and teenagers, who are hardly able to understand the deeper meaning of the lyrics of dance compositions, especially those that deal with sringara, be expected to do abhinaya well?

He agrees that there is a problem but says that even youngsters innocent of understanding can be taught to do abhinaya adequately. It depends on the effectiveness of teaching, he adds. However, he admits in the end, that the youngsters cannot be expected to reveal the maturity of dancers who have the capacity truly to understand the lyrics.

Samraj prides himself on his ability to teach effectively without having to give a demonstration except rarely. There was an occasion in London, he recalls, when he showed how he did this and there was much appreciation. In his view, an instructor should be able to give a dance student verbal instructions in a way the latter understands them and then, as the student tries to follow, make necessary corrections. Judging by what we see on stage where many performers seek to project one bhava or another but not seldom end up offering a caricature of it, we speculate aloud if students shouldn't be using mirrors for learning and correcting mistakes. Samraj smiles and then explains the comment to Ramiah Pillai who hadn't heard it properly. Ramiah Pillai also smiles.

We ask whether Samraj has not stepped up the speed of adavujati-s? There are critics who feel this has gone too far, so that many dancers find it difficult to project the Vazhuvoor bani's grace while executing them. Samraj explains that what he has done is to choreograph new jati korvai-s which, while yet retaining the kalapramanam or tempo of the earlier jati-s, require changes in the adavu-s. The net result is an impression of increased speed. There is more viruviruppu, but not greater speed.



He rejects the implication of the criticism cited earlier and asserts that performers can be trained to execute these adavujati-s effectively.

Dance students today are like glowing embers which can be fanned to flame quickly, he continues. They are quick on the uptake. Implicitly he rejects the frequently-voiced criticism that gurus today rush their students to make their formal debuts—or allow themselves to be persuaded to agree to premature debuts—by saying that, whereas it used to take four or five years in the old days to take a student from the basics to the arangetram stage, it now took only about two years. Apparently the average student is that smart. "Of course," adds he, "there are never-do-well students too."

The significance of what he asserts is all the more noteworthy considering that the typical dance student today is able to devote only one hour a day to taking lessons and practising under the guru's guidance. And that too not everyday of the week. Perhaps the better dancers did work more assiduously and practised for several hours a day. Students were



Jayanthi Rajagopal
forced to do so by great nattuvanars in the old, old days.

Whether a student turns out to be a really accomplished dancer depends not only on her learning capacity and dedication but also on the guru, Samraj continues. Every guru must be getting good, bad and indifferent students but only some gurus succeed in producing outstanding performers, while others churn out mediocrities.

A note of regret creeps into his voice as he says this. While only a small percentage of learners can be expected to be classy, he observes, it is a pity that many who show great potential drop out along the way, for one reason or other.

He asserts that the situation is made worse by 'body-snatchers', gurus who entice good students away from a competent master by offering all kinds of inducements. Many promising students have ended up in blind alleys by succumbing to such blandishments, he adds.

He also voices regret at the practice of various dancers of enlisting the services of *ad hoc* conductors for their recitals. There are more thattuvanars—those who just keep time—than nattuvanars today, he says. "Since these conductors have not been involved

in training the students, they are not involved in the recital, can't really be," he explains. "So, they just keep time mechanically. They are no better than machines that play tapes back because, if there is a lack of synchronization between jati recitation and the performance of the dancer, it is the dancer who has to adjust. Or else, they will have to start the sequence all over again. In these circumstances, it is the mridangam player to whom a dancer looks for guidance. The mridanga vidwans are good although I can't say they are equal to those of the past who showed greater finesse in playing the drum for the dance."

He now reverts to the subject of jati-s.

"The jati-s of the Vazhuvoor school are very intricate," he says, explaining that this has always been that way. "While the nattuvanars of other schools"—he in fact says there are really only two bani-s, those of Vazhuvoor and Pandanallur—"recite the jati-s samam to samam, we recite them from samam to edam. Try asking others to do this. Why, even those who sit in front rows at our performances and try keeping count give up after a while. In 1983, I think that was the year, I conducted a recital of Jayanthi Rajagopal at the Kapaleeswarar Temple in Mylapore, here in Madras. Haridwaramangalam A.K. Palanivel provided rhythm accompaniment on the tavil. I've a video recording of it. It shows how the hands of even knowledgeable persons in the audience froze in midair as they found it difficult to keep track of the tala structure."

Quite intricate this, it seems, though apparently it doesn't affect the dance itself.

We ask : What are his contributions to the Vazhuvoor tradition? He now lists them. The first of course is the choreographing of new adavujati-s which give the impression of speeding up the dance. This must be an improvement inasmuch as an old criticism has been that while the Vazhuvoor nattuvanars recited fast jati-s, the dancers didn't execute them syllable for syllable, with the result there was an apparent discrepancy between the tempos maintained by the two.

What else? Sanchari-s, yes. He has pioneered the practice of interspersing discrete stories in the sanchari-s, he claims. "In Papana-sam Sivan's *Enna tavam seidanalai*, the line 'kaiyil yendi, seerratti, palooti, talatta, enna tavam seidanalai'—what good deeds did I do to deserve to take [Krishna] in

my hands and fondle him, feed him milk and lull him to sleep—offers an opportunity to choreograph a sanchari of this type. I introduced an *upakatha*—a side story—of Krishna's leelas or exploits. Did anyone else do this before me? I don't think so. Anyhow, when I presented this sanchari some 15 or 16 years ago, many said it should't be done. There was opposition to it. Now, of course, everybody does this kind of thing."

"Tyagaraja's *Sadhinchane* is another song to which this type of sanchari has been composed," he adds. "For the line 'Devaki Vasudeva kula'. By the way, there were objections to this too, for using a kriti for a dance. My point, however, is that it is all right to take up this kriti, or any other for that matter, for a dance so long as the nattuvanar and the dancer execute it with bhakti. You know, MS [Subbulakshmi] saw this item performed some three or four years ago and later told us that she was struck with wonder by it."

Samraj now tells us about the dances he has choreographed for the compositions of Oothakadu Venkatasubba Iyer and Periasami Thooran. "It was I who first choreographed the dance for Oothakadu's *Ananda Natana Ganapati bhavaye*," he informs, with a note of anger replacing pride as he adds : "But Chitra [Visweswaran] has been claiming credit for it. It was the last dance she learnt from me. Soon as she completed learning it, she stopped learning from us."

"By the way, it was I who taught Chitra mostly, not my father," he continues. "But she wouldn't acknowledge it. The same is the case with L. Vijayalakshmi. It is like that with many." He seems hurt. As we understand it, he does most or all of the teaching, his more famous father is given all the credit by the students (presumably for selfish reasons) and he, the son, is treated like he is only a ghost. Father, Son and the Ghost—that's the way it was, though it is no longer so. "It's human nature, I suppose," he sighs.

Remembering a question we had asked about his attitude to disciples giving their own ideas on how a dance may be executed, he now talks about it, using an incident involving Chitra as an illustration. "It was when I was teaching her *Nee inda mayam* I was showing her what to do to depict Krishna making a hole in the milk pitcher hanging above. She said she had an idea how to do it. Demonstrating it, she made believe

she was picking up a heavy object from the floor, with great effort, and was hurling it at the pitcher. I told her that won't do, that what was needed to make a little hole in the pitcher was just a little stone. She went up to my father and complained My point is, I do welcome suggestions from my students but I can't accept them if they are not right. After all, the guru is responsible for what his disciple does on stage."

We return to the subject of his accomplishments again. "Oh, yes", he remembers suddenly. "I can take credit for teaching different disciples to interpret the same compositions in different ways. My father didn't do it, I started doing this. This is not a case merely of making allowances for the different endowments of different students. What I have sought to do is deliberately to show how a single composition can be interpreted in many different ways. I think the results have been very satisfactory."

We suggest it should be very interesting to view, in one go, the different interpretations projected on a video screen.

Samraj isn't finished with his comments on Chitra yet. Presently this has to do with the way she was projected as the standard-bearer of the Vazhuvoor bani in one segment of the series on parampara in dance telecast recently. "First, the narrator gave high praise to my father," he recounts. "Then the film showed me conducting my disciple Jayanthi Rajagopal in a dance. Then, abruptly, the scene cut to Chitra who, by remaining silent on a point made by the commentator, gave rise to the impression that she and her school were the torch-bearers of the Vazhuvoor bani. I think she manouvre the whole thing."

This is his interpretation of the telecast. "But I am happy to have many of my father's disciples and my own keeping the Vazhuvoor bani upfront," he says on a note of reconciliation.

We ask him about his disciples—those who explicitly acknowledged him as the master. Can he name those who have come up well?

He hesitates a bit and then mentions Jayanthi Rajagopal, Jayanthasri Rajaram, Radha Venkatraman, Sathy and Sobhana Jaisingh (who is in London).

They too carry the flag for the Vazhuvoor tradition, as do—as did—his father's famous disciples.

N. PATTABHI RAMAN

E - BOOK EDITION
VAZHUVOOR
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